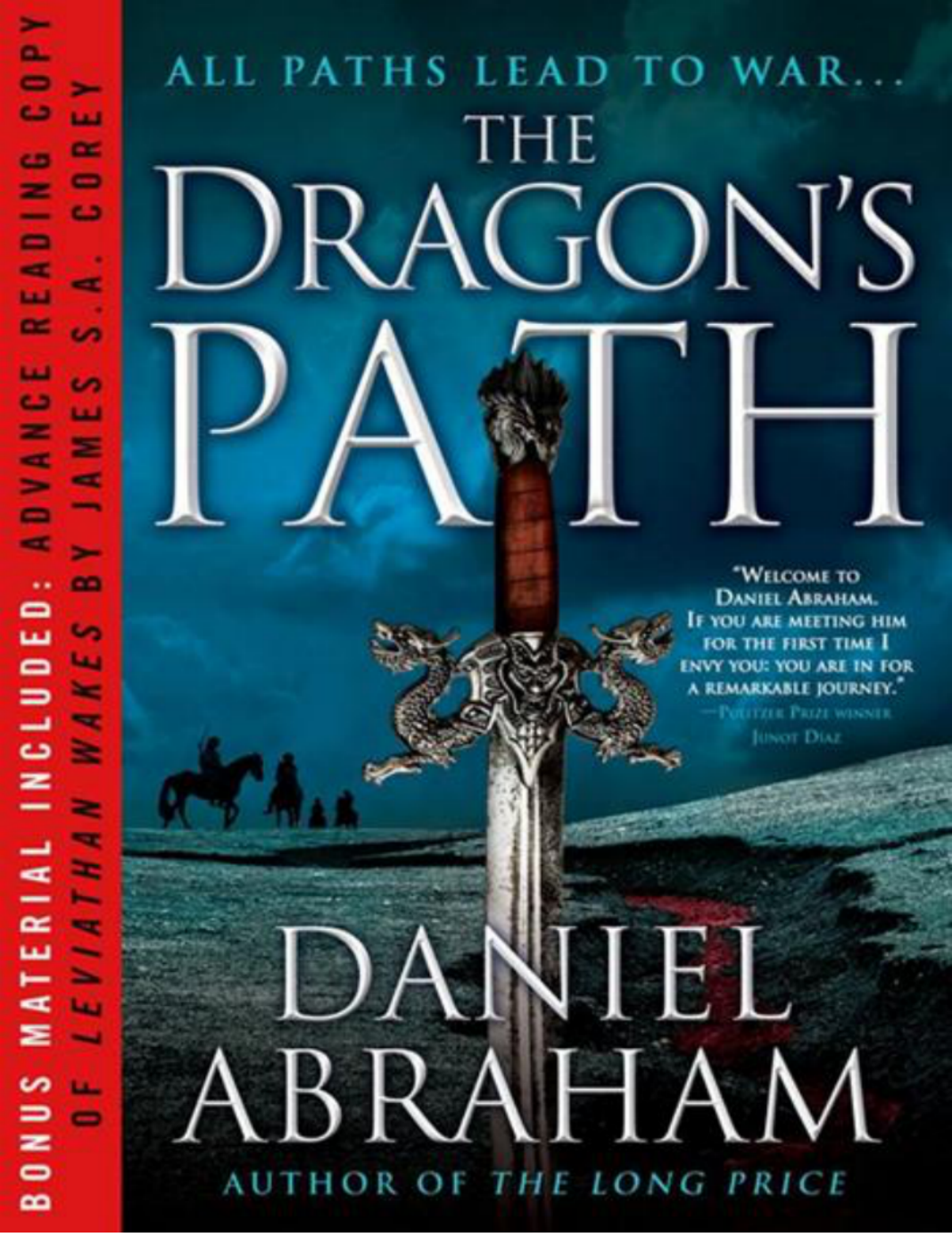
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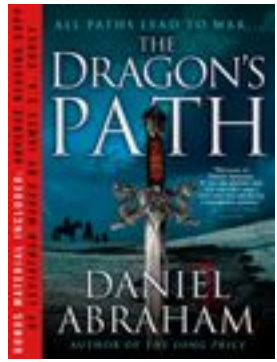
—PULITZER PRIZE WINNER JUNOT DIAZ
DANIEL ABRAHAM
AUTHOR OF *THE LONG PRICE*



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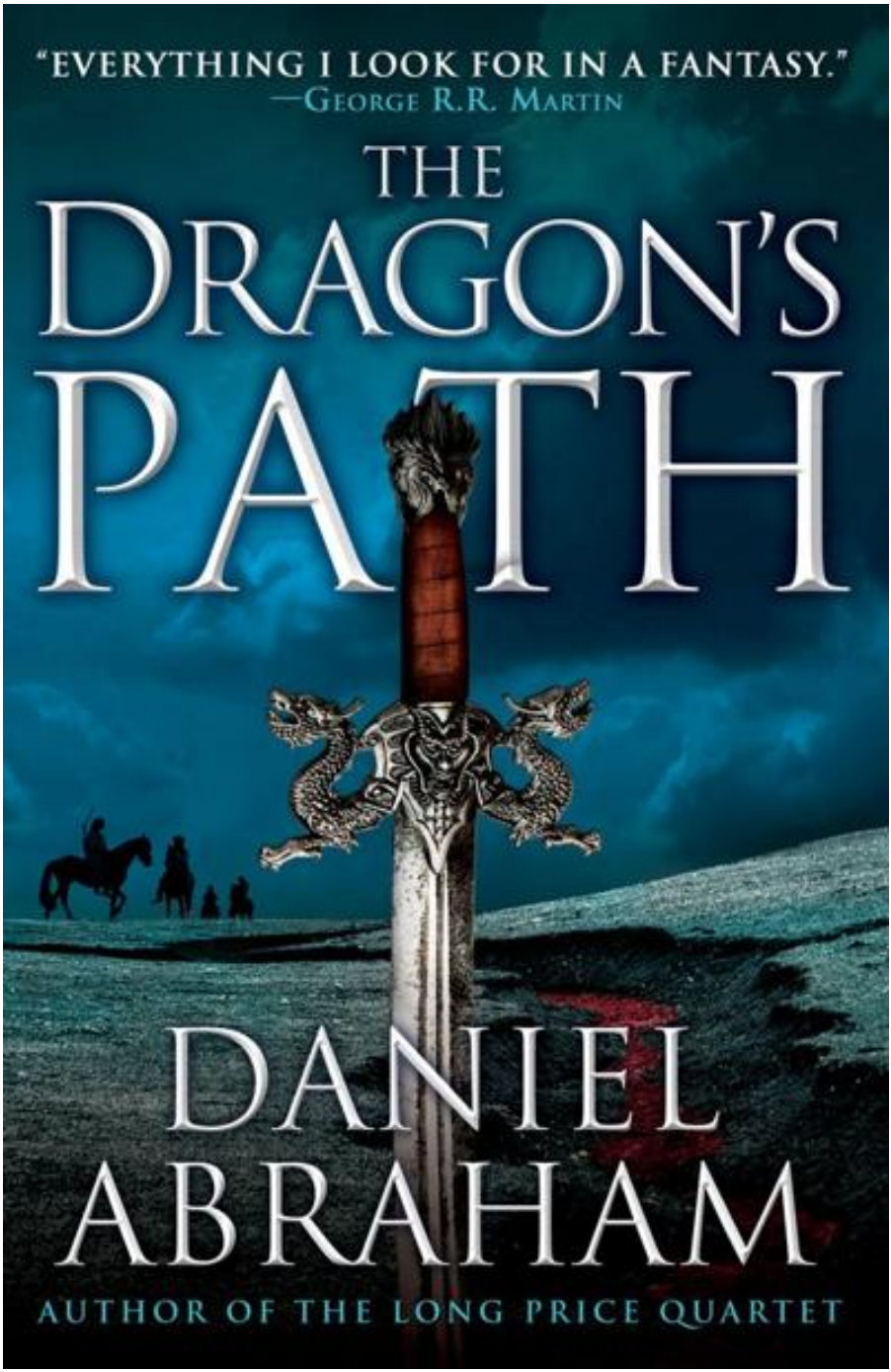
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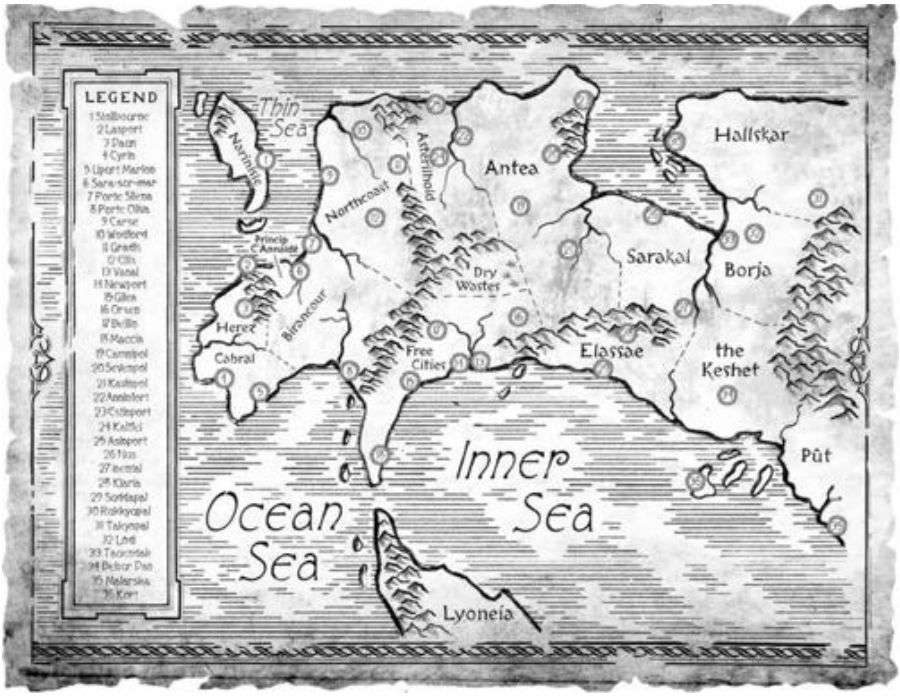
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Prologue

The Apostate

The apostate pressed himself into the shadows of the rock and prayed to nothing in particular that the things riding mules in the pass below him would not look up. His hands ached, the muscles of his legs and back shuddered with exhaustion. The thin cloth of his ceremonial robes fluttered against him in the cold, dust-scented wind. He took the risk of looking down toward the trail.

The five mules had stopped, but the priests hadn't dismounted. Their robes were heavier, warmer. The ancient swords strapped across their backs caught the morning light and glittered a venomous green. Dragon-forged, those blades. They meant death to anyone whose skin they broke. In time, the poison would kill even the men who wielded them. All the more reason, the apostate thought, that his former brothers would kill him quickly and go home. No one wanted to carry those blades for long; they came out only in dire emergency or deadly anger.

Well. At least it was flattering to be taken seriously.

The priest leading the hunting party rose up in his saddle, squinting into the light. The apostate recognized the voice.

"Come out, my son," the high priest shouted. "There is no escape."

The apostate's belly sank. He shifted his weight, preparing to walk down. He stopped himself.

Probably, he told himself. *There is* probably *no escape. But perhaps there is.*

On the trail, the dark-robed figures shifted, turned, consulted among themselves. He couldn't hear their words. He waited, his body growing stiffer and colder. Like a corpse that hadn't had the grace to die. Half a day seemed to pass while the hunters below him conferred, though the sun barely changed its angle in the bare blue sky. And then, between one breath and the next, the mules moved forward again.

He didn't dare move for fear of setting a pebble rolling down the steep cliffs. He tried not to grin. Slowly, the things that had once been men rode their mules down the trail to the end of the valley, and then followed the wide bend to the south. When the last of them slipped out of sight, he stood, hands on his hips, and marveled. He still lived. They had not known where to find him after all.

Despite everything he'd been taught, everything he had until recently believed, the gifts of the spider goddess did not show the truth. It gave her servants something, yes, but not *truth.* More and

more, it seemed his whole life had sprung from a webwork of plausible lies. He should have felt lost. Devastated. Instead, it was like he'd walked from a tomb into the free air. He found himself grinning.

The climb up the remaining western slope bruised him. His sandals slipped. He struggled for finger- and toeholds. But as the sun reached its height, he reached the ridge. To the west, mountain followed mountain, and great billowing clouds towered above them, thunderstorms a soft veil of grey. But in the farthest passes, he saw the land level. Flatten. Distance made the plains grey-blue, and the wind on the mountain's peak cut at his skin like claws. Lightning flashed on the horizon. As if in answer, a hawk shrieked.

It would take weeks alone and on foot. He had no food, and worse, no water. He'd slept the last five nights in caves and under bushes. His former brothers and friends—the men he had known and loved his whole life—were combing the trails and villages, intent on his death. Mountain lions and dire wolves hunted in the heights.

He ran a hand through his thick, wiry hair, sighed, and began the downward climb. He would probably die before he reached the Keshet and a city large enough to lose himself in.

But only *probably*.

In the last light of the falling sun, he found a stony overhang near a thin, muddy stream. He sacrificed a length of the strap from his right sandal to fashion a crude fire bow, and as the cruel chill came down from the sky, he squatted next to the high ring of stones that hid his small fire. The dry scrub burned hot and with little smoke, but quickly. He fell into a rhythm of feeding small twig after small twig into the flame, never letting it grow large enough to illuminate his shelter to those hunting and never letting it die. The warmth didn't seem to reach past his elbows.

Far off, something shrieked. He tried to ignore it. His body ached with exhaustion and spent effort, but his mind, freed now from the constant distraction of his journey, gained a dangerous speed. In the darkness, his memory sharpened. The sense of freedom and possibility gave way to loss, loneliness, and dislocation. Those, he believed, were more likely to kill him than a hunting cat.

He had been born in hills much like these. Passed his youth playing games of sword and whip using branches and woven bark. Had he ever felt the ambition to join the ranks of the monks in their great hidden temple? He must have, though from the biting cold of his poor stone shelter, it was hard to imagine it. He could remember looking up with awe at the high wall of stone. At the rock-carved sentries from all the thirteen races of humanity worn by wind and rain until all of

them—Cinnae and Tralgu, Southling and Firstblood, Timzinae and Yemmu and Drowned—wore the same blank faces and clubbed fists. Indistinguishable. Only the wide wings and dagger teeth of the dragon arching above them all were still clear. And worked into the huge iron gate, black letters spelled out words in a language no one in the village knew.

When he became a novice, he learned what it said. BOUND IS NOT BROKEN. He had believed once that he knew what it meant.

The breeze shifted, raising the embers like fireflies. A bit of ash stung his eye, and he rubbed at it with the back of his hand. His blood shifted, currents in his body responding to something that was not him. The goddess, he'd thought. He had gone to the great gate with the other boys of his village. He had offered himself up—life and body—and in return…

In return the mysteries had been revealed. First, it had only been knowledge: letters enough to read the holy books, numbers enough to keep the temple's records. He had read the stories of the Dragon Empire and its fall. Of the spider goddess coming to bring justice to the world.

Deception, they said, had no power over her.

He'd tested it, of course. He believed them, and still he had tested. He would lie to the priests, just to see whether it could be done. He'd chosen things that only he could know: his father's clan name, his sister's favorite meals, his own dreams. The priests had whipped him when he spoke false, they had spared him when he was truthful, and they were never, *never* wrong. His certainty had grown. His faith. When the high priest had chosen him to rise to novice, he'd been certain that great things awaited him, because the priests had told him that they did.

After the nightmare of his initiation was over, he'd felt the power of the spider goddess in his own blood. The first time he'd felt someone lie, it had been like discovering a new sense. The first time he had spoken with the voice of the goddess, he'd felt his words commanding belief as if they had been made from fire.

And now he had fallen from grace, and none of it might be true. There might be no such place as the Keshet. He believed there was, so much so that he had risked his life on flight to it. But he had never been there. The marks on the maps could be lies. For that matter, there might have been no dragons, no empire, no great war. He had never seen the ocean; there might be no such thing. He knew only what he himself had seen and heard and felt.

He knew *nothing*.

On violent impulse, he sank his teeth into the flesh of his palm. His blood welled up, and he cupped it. In the faint firelight, it looked

nearly black. Black, with small, darker knots. One of the knots unfurled tiny legs. The spider crawled mindlessly around the cup of his hand. Another one joined it. He watched them: the agents of the goddess in whom he no longer believed. Carefully, slowly, he tipped his hand over the small flame. One of the spiders fell into it, hair-thin legs shriveling instantly.

"Well," he said. "You can die. I know *that.*"

The mountains seemed to go on forever, each crest a new threat, each valley thick with danger. He skirted the small villages, venturing close only to steal a drink from the stone cisterns. He ate lizards and the tiny flesh-colored nuts of scrub pine. He avoided the places where wide, clawed paws marked paths in the dirt. One night, he found a circle of standing pillars with a small chamber beneath them that seemed to offer shelter and a place to recover his strength, but his sleep there had been troubled by dreams so violent and alien that he pushed on instead.

He lost weight, the woven leather of his belt hanging low around his waist. His sandals' soles thinned, and his fire bow wore out quickly. Time lost its meaning. Day followed day followed day. Every morning he thought, *This will probably be the last day of my life. Only probably.*

The *probably* was always enough. And then, late one morning, he pulled himself to the top of a boulder-strewn hill, and there wasn't another to follow it. The wide western plains spread out before him, a river shining in its cloak of green grass and trees. The view was deceptive. He guessed it would still be two days on foot before he reached it. Still, he sat on a wide, rough stone, looked out over the world, and let himself weep until almost midday.

As he came nearer to the river, he felt a new anxiety start to gnaw at his belly. On the day, weeks ago, when he had slipped over the temple's wall and fled, the idea of disappearing into a city had been a distant concern. Now he saw the smoke of a hundred cookfires rising from the trees. The marks of wild animals were scarce. Twice, he saw men riding huge horses in the distance. The dusty rags of his robe, the ruins of his sandals, and the reek of his own unwashed skin reminded him that this was as difficult and as dangerous as anything he'd done to now. How would the men and women of the Keshet greet a wild man from the mountains? Would they cut him down out of hand?

He circled the city by the river, astounded at the sheer size of the place. He had never seen anything so large. The long wooden buildings with their thatched roofs could have held a thousand people. The roads were paved in stone. He kept to the underbrush like a thief,

watching.

It was the sight of a Yemmu woman that gave him courage. That and his hunger. At the fringe of the city, where the last of the houses sat between road and river, she labored in her garden. She was half again as tall as he was, and broad as a bull across the shoulders. Her tusks rose from her jaw until she seemed in danger of piercing her own cheeks if she laughed. Her breasts hung high above a peasant girdle not so different from the ones his own mother and sister had worn, only with three times the cloth and leather.

She was the first person he had ever seen who wasn't a Firstblood. The first real evidence that the thirteen races of humanity truly existed. Hiding behind the bushes, peeking at her as she leaned in the soft earth and plucked weeds between gigantic fingers, he felt something like wonder.

He stepped forward before he could talk himself back into cowardice. Her wide head rose sharply, her nostrils flaring. He raised a hand, almost in apology.

"Forgive me," he said. "I'm… I'm in trouble. And I was hoping you might help me."

The woman's eyes narrowed to slits. She lowered her stance like a hunting cat preparing for battle. It occurred to him that it might have been wiser to discover if she spoke his language before he'd approached her.

"I've come from the mountains," he said, hearing the desperation in his own voice. And hearing something else besides. The inaudible thrumming of his blood. The gift of the spider goddess commanding the woman to believe him.

"We don't trade with Firstbloods," the Yemmu woman growled. "Not from those twice-shat mountains anyway. Get away from here, and take your men with you."

"I don't have any men," he said. The things in his blood roused themselves, excited to be used. The woman shifted her head as his stolen magic convinced her. "I'm alone. And unarmed. I've been walking for… weeks. I can work if you'd like. For a little food and a warm place to sleep. Just for the night."

"Alone and unarmed. Through the mountains?"

"Yes."

She snorted, and he had the sense he was being evaluated. Judged.

"You're an idiot," she said.

"Yes," he said. "I am. Friendly, though. Harmless."

It was a very long moment before she laughed.

She set him to hauling river water to her cistern while she finished her gardening. The bucket was fashioned for Yemmu hands, and he could only fill it half full before it became too heavy to lift. But he

struggled manfully from the little house to the rough wooden platform and then back again. He was careful not to scrape himself, or at least not so badly as to draw blood. His welcome was uncertain enough without the spiders to explain.

At sunset, she made a place for him at her table. The fire in the pit seemed extravagant, and he had to remind himself that the things that had been his brothers weren't here, scanning for signs of him. She scooped a bowl of stew from the pot above the fire. It had the rich, deep, complex flavor of a constant pot; the stewpot never leaving the fire, and new hanks of meat and vegetables thrown in as they came to hand. Some of the bits of dark flesh swimming in the greasy broth might have been cooking since before he'd left the temple. It was the best meal he'd ever had.

"My man's at the caravanserai," she said. "One of the princes s'posed to be coming in, and they'll be hungry. Took all the pigs with. Sell 'em all if we're lucky. Get enough silver to see us through storm season."

He listened to her voice and also the stirring in his blood. The last part had been a lie. She *didn't* believe that the silver would last. He wondered if it worried her, and if there was some way he could see she had what she needed. He would try, at least. Before he left.

"What about you, you poor shit?" she asked, her voice soft and warm. "Whose sheep did you fuck that you're begging work from me?"

The apostate chuckled. The warm food in his belly, the fire at his side, and the knowledge that a pallet of straw and a thin wool blanket were waiting for him outside conspired to relax his shoulders and his belly. The Yemmu woman's huge gold-flecked eyes stayed on him. He shrugged.

"I discovered that believing something doesn't make it true," he said carefully. "There were things I'd accepted, that I believed to my bones, and I was… wrong."

"Misled?" she asked.

"Misled," he agreed, and then paused. "Or perhaps not. Not intentionally. No matter how wrong you are, it's not a lie if you believe it."

The Yemmu woman whistled—an impressive feat, considering her tusks—and flapped her hands in mock admiration.

"High philosophy from the water grunt," she said. "Next you'll be preaching and asking tithes."

"Not me," he said, laughing with her.

She took a long slurp from her own bowl. The fire crackled. Something—rats, perhaps, or insects—rattled in the thatch overhead.

"Fell out with a woman, did you?" she asked.

“A goddess,” he said.

“Yeah. Always seems like that, dunit?” she said, staring into the fire. “Some new love comes on like there’s something different about ’em. Like God himself talks whenever their lips flap. And then…”

She snorted again, part amusement, part bitterness.

“And what all went wrong with your goddess?” she asked.

The apostate lifted a scrap of something that might have been a potato to his mouth, chewed the soft flesh, the gritty skin. He struggled to put words to thoughts that had never been spoken aloud. His voice trembled.

“She is going to eat the world.”

Captain Marcus Wester

Marcus rubbed his chin with a callused palm.

"Yardem?"

"Sir?" rumbled the Tralgu looming at his side.

"The day you throw me in a ditch and take command of the company?"

"Yes, sir."

"It wouldn't be today, would it?"

The Tralgu crossed his thick arms and flicked a jingling ear.

"No, sir," he said at last. "Not today."

"Pity."

The public gaol of Vanai had once been a menagerie. In ancient days, the dragons themselves had stalked the wide square and bathed in the great fountain at its center. At the perimeter, a deep pit, and then great cages rising three stories high. The dragon's jade façades were carved with figures of the beasts that had once paced behind the iron bars: lions, gryphons, great six-headed serpents, wolves, bears, great birds with breasts like women.

Between them, pillars in the shapes of the thirteen races of mankind: tall-eared Tralgu, chitinous Timzinae, tusked Yemmu, and on and on. The Dartinae even had small braziers hidden in its eyeholes to mimic the glow of their gaze, though no one lit them anymore. The figures were unworn by time and rain, marred only by the black, weeping streaks where the bars had rusted away—nothing eroded dragon's jade and nothing broke it. But the animals themselves were gone, and in their place, people.

Sullen or angry or bored, the guests of Vanai's justice were displayed in their shame for ridicule and identification while they waited for the sentence of the appointed magistrate. Good, upstanding citizens could parade through the square where few bronze pennies would buy offal from a stand, usually wrapped in a sling of rags. Boys would make a show of showering loose shit, dead rats, and rotting vegetables over the prisoners. A few tearful wives and husbands would bring cheese and butter to throw across the void, but even if the gift reached the intended hand, there was no peace in prison. As they watched from the low wall at the pit's edge, Marcus saw one such lucky man—a Kurtadam with clicking beads in his close, otter-smooth pelt—being beaten for his round of white bread while a pack of Firstblood boys laughed and pointed at him and called out, *Clicker,*

clicker, ass-licker and other racial insults.

In the lowest row of cells, seven men sat. Most had the build and scars of soldiers, but one kept himself apart, thin legs stuck between the bars, heels swinging over the pit. The six soldiers had been Marcus's men. The other, the company cunning man. They belonged to the prince now.

"We're being watched," the Tralgu said.

"I know."

The cunning man raised an arm in a rueful wave. Marcus responded with a false smile and a less polite gesture. His former cunning man looked away.

"Not him, sir. The other one."

Marcus shifted his attention away from the cages. It only took a moment to see the man Yardem meant. Not far from the wide space where the street spilled into the square, a young man in the gilt armor of the prince's guard slouched at ease. A tug at his memory brought Marcus the man's name.

"Well, God smiles," Marcus said sourly.

The guard, seeing himself noticed, gave a rough salute and walked toward them. He was thick-faced and soft about the shoulders. The smell of bathhouse cedar oil came off him like he'd been dipped in it. Marcus shrugged the way he did before a fight.

"Captain Wester," the guard said with a nod. And then, "And Yardem Hane. Still following the captain, are you?"

"Sergeant Dossen, isn't it?" Marcus said.

"Tertian Dossen now. The prince keeps to the old titles. Those your men?"

"Who, those?" Marcus asked with feigned innocence. "Worked with lots of men, one time and another. Shouldn't be surprised if I knew men in every gaol in the Free Cities."

"That bunch there. We herded them up last night for being drunk and causing trouble."

"Men will do that."

"You don't know anything about it?"

"I wouldn't want to say anything that might get back to the magistrate," Marcus said. "He might not take it the way I meant."

Dossen spat into the wide air of the ditch.

"I can respect you wanting to keep them out of trouble, Captain. But it wouldn't make a difference. War's coming, and the prince needs men. That lot has training. Experience. They'll be impressed into the army. Might even get ranks."

Marcus felt the anger growing, the warmth in his chest and belly, the sense he had grown an inch taller. Like all things that felt good, he distrusted it.

“You sound like there’s something you want to say.”

Dossen smiled like a river snake.

“You’ve still got a reputation. Captain Wester, hero of Gradis and Wodford. The prince would notice that. You could take a fair commission.”

“Princes, barons, dukes. They’re all just little kings,” Marcus said, a degree more hotly than he’d intended. “I don’t work for kings.”

“You will for this one,” Dossen said.

Yardem scratched his belly and yawned. It was a signal that reminded Marcus to keep his temper. Marcus took his hand off the pommel of his blade.

“Dossen, old friend,” Marcus said, “a good half of this city’s defense is hired men. I’ve seen Karol Dannian and his boys. Merrisan Koke. Your prince will lose all of them if the word gets out that he’s impressing professional soldiers who are under contract—”

Dossen’s jaw actually dropped in astonishment.

“You aren’t under contract,” he said.

“I am,” Marcus said. “We’re guard on a caravan for Carse up in Northcoast. Already paid.”

The guard looked across the gap at the incarcerated men, the dejected cunning man, and the rust-streaked jade. A pigeon landed on the carved foot of a gryphon, shook its pearl-grey tailfeathers, and shat on the cunning man’s knee. An old man behind them brayed out a laugh.

“You don’t have any men,” Dossen said. “Those are your caravan guards right there. You and the dog-boy can’t guard a ’van by yourselves. The papers call for eight sword-and-bows and a company cunning man.”

“Didn’t know you’d read our contract,” Yardem said. “And don’t call me dog-boy.”

Dossen pressed his lips together, eyes narrow and annoyed. His armor clinked when he shrugged, too thin a sound for the metal to be much more than show.

“Yes, I saw it.”

“But I’m sure it had nothing to do with those particular men getting rounded up,” Marcus said.

“You’d best come along, Captain. The city of Vanai needs you.”

“The caravan leaves in three days,” Marcus said. “And I leave with it. Under contract.”

Dossen didn’t move, but his face flushed red. Marcus suspected that a member of the prince’s guard wasn’t used to being refused.

“You think you’re above men like me?” Dossen said. “You think you can dictate terms and the world’s going to listen? Wake up, Wester. You’re a long way from the fields of Ellis.”

Yardem grunted like he'd taken a body blow and shook his massive head.

"I wouldn't have mentioned Ellis," he said, his voice a low rumble.

Dossen looked up at the Tralgu with contempt, then at Marcus, and then, nervously, away.

"Didn't mean disrespect to your family, Captain," he said.

"Walk away," Marcus said. "Do it now."

Dossen stepped back. Just out of thrusting range, he paused.

"Three days until the 'van leaves," he said.

The rest was clear. *Fail to meet the terms of the contract, and answer to the prince. Like it or no.* Marcus didn't answer. Dossen turned and strode into the square.

"That's a problem," Yardem said.

"It is."

"We need men, sir."

"We do."

"Any thoughts on where we find them?"

"No."

Marcus took one more despairing look at the men who had once been his, shook his head, and left the menagerie behind.

The city of Vanai had once been a seaport at the mouth of the river Taneish, but centuries of silt had slowly pressed the river mouth away until now it lay a full morning's ride to the south. Canals and waterways laced the city, and flatboats still came there on the way to and from the smaller, younger city of Newport carrying grain and wool, silver and timber from the countries to the north.

Like all the Free Cities, Vanai had a history of conflict. It had been a republic led by a lottery-chosen council, the private holding of a monarch, the ally or enemy of Birancour or the Severed Throne depending on which way the wind blew. It had been a center of religion, and of revolt against religion. Every incarnation had left its mark upon the white wood buildings, the greasy canals, the narrow streets and open squares.

Here, ancient gates still hung at rest, prepared to protect the halls of the Common Council though the last councilmen were all generations dead. There, a noble bronze statue showed the wise and solemn countenance of a robed and mitred bishop streaked with verdigris and pigeon shit. The streets had signs in wood and stone from a thousand years of history, so that a single alley might be called by a dozen names. Iron gates marked the twenty tiny political districts, allowing the prince to remake the pathways through the city at his whim, protection against riots and conspiracy.

But even more than the architecture, Vanai wore its past in the character of its people.

Timzinae and Firstblood were most common, but glow-eyed, hairless Dartinae, the reed-thin, snow-pale Cinnae, and bronze-scaled Jasuru all had districts within the city's wide white walls. Time and experience had given them all a sophisticated, cynical edge. Walking through the narrow streets beside rich green canals, Marcus could see all the small signs of it. Firstblood merchants, loyalists to the prince, offered the soldiers discounts on goods that had been marked higher for the purpose. The beer houses and physicians, tanners and cobblers and professionals of every sort prepared fresh signs in Imperial Antean script so that business could go on unabated after the war was lost. Old Timzinae men, their dark scales greying and cracked, sat cross-legged at quayside tables talking about the last revolution when the prince's father had taken power from the republic. Their granddaughters walked in groups wearing thin white skirts of an almost imperial cut, black-scaled legs showing through the cloth like shadows.

Yes, some soldiers would die. Yes, some buildings would burn. Some women would be raped. Some fortunes would be lost. It was an evil that the city would weather, as it had before, and no one expected the disaster would come to them in particular. The soul of the city could be summarized with a shrug.

In a green-grass common, a weathered theatrical cart had dropped its side, the shallow stage hanging with dirty yellow ribbons. The small crowd standing before it looked curious and skeptical in equal measure. As Marcus walked past, an old man stepped out from behind the ribbons. His hair stood high on his head, and his beard jutted.

"Stop!" the man cried in a deep and resonant voice. "Stop now, and come near! Hear the tale of Aleren Mankiller and the Sword of the Dragons! Or if you are faint of heart, move on. For our tale is one of grand adventure. Love, war, betrayal, and vengeance shall spill out now, upon these poor boards, and I warn you…"

The actor's voice seemed to drop to a whisper, though it still carried as clearly as the shouting.

"… not all that are good end well. Not all that are evil are punished. Come close, my friends, and know that in our tale as in the world, *anything* may happen."

Marcus didn't realize he'd stopped walking until Yardem spoke.

"He's good."

"Is, isn't he?"

"Watch for a bit, sir?"

Marcus didn't answer, but like the rest of the small crowd stepped closer. The play was a standard enough tale. An ancient prophecy, an evil rising from the depths of hell, and a relic of the Dragon Empire destined for the hand of the hero. The woman who played the maiden

fair was perhaps a bit too old, and the man who spoke the hero's part a little too soft. But the lines were well delivered, and the troupe was professionally rehearsed. Marcus picked out a long-haired woman and a stick-thin youth in the crowd who laughed at all the right times and put down hecklers: spare players planted in the audience. But each time the actor who had called the introduction came onstage, Marcus lost his train of thought.

The old man played Orcus the Demon King with such a sense of evil and pathos that it was easy to forget it was all for show. When Aleren Mankiller swung the Dragon Sword and blood gouted down the Demon King's chest, Marcus had to stop himself from reaching for his blade.

In the end, and despite the actor's warnings, the good triumphed, the evil were vanquished, and the players took their bows. Marcus was startled by the applause; the crowd had doubled without his noticing. Even Yardem was thumping his plate-wide palms together and grinning. Marcus dug a silver coin out of the pouch hung under his shirt and tossed it onto the boards. It landed with a hard tap, and a moment later Orcus the Demon King was smiling and bowing in a small rain shower of money. He thanked them for their generosity and their kindness with such warmth that even walking away, Marcus found himself thinking of people as generous and kind.

The early autumn sun was lowering, the pale city glowing gold. The audience unwound itself from around the stage, breaking off in groups of two and three to walk across the sward. Marcus sat on a stone bench under a yellow-leafed oak and watched as the actors reassembled their cart. A pack of Firstblood children descended upon the players, laughing, and were chased away with grins. Marcus leaned back and considered the darkening sky through the tree's boughs.

"You have a plan," Yardem said.

"Do I?"

"Yes, sir."

It had been a fine little play. Not a huge cast. Alaren Mankiller and his companion. The maiden fair. Orcus the Demon King. The one man who'd taken all the small business as villager or demon or nobleman, depending on his hat. Five people for a full play's work. And the two leading the crowd…

Seven people.

"Ah," Marcus said. "So I do."

Seven people sat at the wide round table drinking beer and eating cheese and sausage paid from Marcus's diminishing funds. The two

from the crowd were the thin boy Mikel and the long-haired woman Cary. The youth who'd played the hero was Sandr, the elderly maiden fair was Opal, the hero's companion was Hornet, and the jack-of-all-roles was Smit. Yardem sat with them, a wide, gentle smile on his face, like a mother hound surrounded by puppies.

Marcus sat apart at a smaller table with Orcus the Demon King.

"And I," Orcus said, "am called Kitap rol Keshmet, among other things. Most often, Master Kit."

"I'm not going to remember all those names," Marcus said.

"We'll remind you. I don't think anyone is likely to take offense," Master Kit said, "especially if you keep buying the drinks."

"Fair point."

"Which brings us to the question, doesn't it, Captain? I can't think you've brought us all here out of your overflowing love of the stage?"

"No."

Master Kit raised his eyebrows in an unspoken question. Off the stage and out of makeup, he was an interesting-looking man. He had a long face and steel-grey hair. The deep olive tone of his skin reminded Marcus of the Firstblood men who lived in the deserts across the Inner Sea, and his eyes were so dark, Marcus suspected there might be Southling blood in his heritage somewhere not too far back.

"The prince wants to press me into his army," Marcus said.

"I understand that," Master Kit said. "We lost two of our company that way. Sandr's our understudy. He's been getting up before the sun reciting lines."

"I'd rather not work for the prince," Marcus said. "And as long as I have a legitimate contract, the issue won't arise."

"The issue?"

"Refusing a press gang ends you up on the field or in a grave. And I'm not going in the field for Vanai."

Master Kit frowned, great brows curving in like caterpillars.

"I hope you'll forgive me, Captain. Did you just tell me this is a matter of life and death for you?"

"Yes."

"You seem very calm about that."

"It's not the first time."

The actor leaned back in his chair, fingers laced over his flat belly. He looked thoughtful and sober, but also interested. Marcus took a swig of the beer. It tasted of yeast and molasses.

"I don't think I can hide both of you," Master Kit said. "You, perhaps. We have ways of making a man not seem himself, but a Tralgu this far west? If the prince knows to look for you, I'm afraid keeping with your friend is like hanging a flag on you. We'd be caught."

“I don’t want to join your troupe,” Marcus said.

“No?” Master Kit said. “Then what are we talking about?”

At the other table, the long-haired woman stood on her chair, struck a noble pose, and began declaiming the Rite of St. Ancian in a comic lisp. The others all laughed, except Yardem, who smiled amusedly and flicked his ears. Cary. Her name was Cary.

“I want your troupe to join me. There’s a caravan to Carse.”

“We call ourselves a traveling company,” Master Kit said. “I think Carse is a good venue, and we haven’t been there in years. But I don’t see how putting us in your ’van helps you.”

“The prince took my men. I need you to replace them. I want you to act as guards.”

“You’re serious.”

“I am.”

Master Kit laughed and shook his head.

“We aren’t fighters,” he said. “All that onstage is dance and show. Faced with a real soldier, I doubt we would acquit ourselves very well.”

“I don’t need you to *be* guards,” Marcus said. “I need you to *act* as them. Raiders aren’t stupid. They calculate their chances just the way anyone would. Caravans fall because they don’t have enough bodies in armor or they’re carrying something that makes it worth the risk. If we put your people in leather and bows, no one is going know whether they can use them. And the cargo we’re hauling isn’t worth a fight.”

“No?”

“Tin and iron. Undyed wool. Some leatherwork,” Marcus said. “A man in the Old Quarter called Master Will put together an association of merchants to send out their goods as near the battle as they can and hope the fighting’s over before payment comes. It’s small and low-risk. If I were a raider, I wouldn’t look at it twice.”

“And the pay is good?”

“Very good,” Marcus said.

Master Kit crossed his arms, frowning.

“Well, it’s decent,” Marcus said. “For what it is. And it will get your people out of harm’s way. Even soft little gentlemen’s wars like this spill some blood, and you have women in your troupe.”

“I think Cary and Opal can look after themselves,” Master Kit said.

“Not if the city’s sacked. Princes and empires don’t care if a few actors get raped and killed. People like you are beneath their notice, and the foot soldiers know that.”

The actor looked at the larger table. Several conversations seemed to be going on simultaneously, some of the actors taking part in all of them. The older man’s gaze softened.

“I believe you, Captain.”

They sat in silence for a moment, only the roar of the fire in the grate, other voices raised in conversation, and the chill evening wind rattling the doors and windows. The chimney draw was poor, and it belched occasional puffs of smoke into the rooms. The actor shook his head.

“May I ask you something?” Master Kit said.

“Go ahead.”

“I know your reputation. And I have the sense that you are a man with experience. Well bruised by the world. Guarding small caravans in the Free Cities seems to me an odd place to find you.”

“That’s not a question,” Marcus said.

“Why are you doing this?”

Marcus shrugged.

“Too stubborn to die,” he said, trying to make it sound like a joke.

Master Kit’s smile would have been pitying if it hadn’t carried some hidden suffering of its own.

“I believe that too, Captain. Well. You need nine soldiers to protect the last caravan from free Vanai?”

“Eight,” Marcus said. “Eight soldiers and a cunning man.”

Master Kit looked up at the soot-darkened ceiling.

“I have always wanted to play a cunning man,” he said.

Sir Geder Palliako Heir of the Viscount of Rivenhalm

If Geder Palliako hadn't been thinking about his translation, he would have saved himself. The book in question was a speculative essay on the Drowned by a semi-discredited philosopher from Princip C'Annaldé. Geder had found it in a scriptorum in Camnipol, and, preparing for the long march south to the Free Cities, he had left out a spare pair of boots to make room for it. The dialect was ancient and obscure. The leather binding wasn't original. Its pages were almost brown with age, and the ink was faint.

He loved it.

The waxed cloth of his tent was cheaper than good field leathers, but it kept the worst of the cold at bay. His legs and back ached from riding. His inner thighs were chafed, and he had untied his vest to give his belly some room. His father had the same build. The family curse, he called it. Geder had an hour, perhaps, before he had to sleep, and he was spending it on a folding stool, hunched close over his book, piecing out each word and phrase.

> Unlike the animals of the field, humanity need not resort to an abstract, mythological God to discover its reason for being. With the exception of the unmodified, bestial Firstblood, each race of humanity is the artifact of some purpose. The eastern races—Yemmu, Tralgu, Jasuru—were clearly fashioned as beasts of war; the Raushadam as objects of amusement and entertainment, the Timzinae—youngest of the races—as a race of beekeepers or some such light use, the Cinnae, myself included, as the conscious lens of wisdom and philosophy, and so on.
>
> But what of the Drowned? Alone of the races of humanity, the Drowned show design without purpose. Common opinion places these, our lesser siblings, as akin to plants or the slow-moving beasts of the western continents. Their occasional gatherings in tidepools indicate more about the ocean's currents than anything of human will. Some romantics suggest that the Drowned are themselves working on some deep, dragon-inspired plan that continues to unfold even after the death of its planners. A romantic thought, and one which must be forgiven.

> Instead, I think it is clear, the Drowned are the clearest example of humanity as artistic expression, and as such—

Or would *aesthetic intention* be more accurate than *artistic expression?* Geder rubbed his eyes. It was late. Too late. Tomorrow was another long ride to the south with another day of the same following it. If God was kind, they'd reach the border in a week, spend a day or at worst two choosing the field of battle, a day to crush the local forces, and he could be in a real bed, eating real food, and drinking wine that didn't taste of the skin it had been carried in. If he could only make it that far.

Geder put the book aside. He combed his hair, pleased by the absence of lice. He washed his face and hands, then laced up his vest for the short trek to the latrines as a last stop before bed. Outside his tent, his squire—another gift from his father—slept curled in a ball after the Dartinae fashion, eyes glowing a dull red behind their lids. Beyond him, the army lay on the countryside like a moving city.

Cookfires dotted the nearby hills and filled the air with the smell of lentils. The carts were gathered in the center of the camp, and the mules, horses, and slaves were all in separate corrals beside them. A cold wind blew from the north. It was a good sign. No rain. The moon had crawled halfway up the sky, its crescent offering the idea of light more than actual illumination, so Geder made his way to the latrine carefully.

The essay kept turning itself in his mind. He wished there was someone on the march with whom he could discuss the matter, but speculative essay wasn't considered a manly art. Poetry. Riding. Archery. Swordplay. Even history, if it was done with sufficiently apt turns of phrase. But speculative essay was a guilty pleasure, best hidden from his companions. They laughed at him enough for the size of his belly. No need to give them more stones for their slings. But if not *aesthetic intention*… was the Cinnae author *really* saying that the Drowned were only brought into existence because they made the shoreline pretty?

The latrine was empty, a small cloth tent with two rough planks spanning a pit. Geder took down his hose, his mind still turning on the fine points of the book. He noticed the sweet smell under the reek of shit, but didn't put importance on it. He sat his bare ass on the planks, sighed, and wondered a moment too late why the latrine smelled of sawdust.

The planks gave way, and Geder shrieked as he tipped backwards and down into the foul-smelling swamp of turds and piss. One of the planks bounced against the side of the pit and gouged his arm. The force of his landing blew the breath out of him. He lay stunned in the

stinking darkness, his jacket and hose soaking up the sewer wetness and the cold.

Laughter came from above him. And then light.

Four lanterns shed their hoods, glowing in the sky above him. The light hid the faces of the men who held them, but the voices were clear enough. His so-called friends and companions of the sword. Jorey Kalliam, son of the Baron of Osterling Fells. Sir Gospey Allintot. Sodai Carvenallin, secretary to the High Marshal. And, worst of all, Sir Alan Klin, captain of the company, Geder's immediate superior, and the man to whom he would have reported the poor behavior of his fellows. Geder stood up, his head and shoulders peeking above the pit while the other men howled their mirth.

"Very funny," Geder said, holding shit-stained hands up to them. "Now help me out of this."

Jorey took him by the arm and hauled him up. He had to give the man some credit for not shying away from the mess they'd tipped him into. Geder's hose hung at his knees, soaked and filthy. He stood in the lantern light considering whether to put them back on or go naked from the waist down. With a sigh, he pulled up the hose.

"You were our last hope," Klin said, pounding Geder's shoulder. There were tears of hilarity running down his cheeks. "Everyone else noticed something wrong. Well, except Sodai, but he was too skinny to break the boards."

"Well, it was an excellent joke," Geder said sourly. "Now I'm going to go find something clean to—"

"Ah, no," Sodai said in his nasal, high-town accent. "Please, my friend. Don't spoil the night. It was a jest! Take it as it was meant."

"It's truth," Klin said, putting an arm around Geder's shoulder. "You must let us apologize. Come, my friends! To the tents!"

The four men stumbled off through the darkness, hauling Geder along with them. Of the four, only Jorey seemed genuinely sympathetic, and then only in his silence.

All through his childhood, Geder had imagined what it would be to serve the king, to ride on campaign, to prove his cleverness and his strength in arms. He read stories of the great warriors of old, heard his father's wine-soaked anecdotes about the friendship and camaraderie of the sword.

Reality disappointed.

The captain's tent was heavy leather strung on iron frames. Inside, it was more luxurious than Geder's home. Silk hung from the ceiling, and a great fire roared in the pit, smoke channeled up and out by a hanging chimney of finely wrought chain and blackened leather. The heat was like walking into the worst of summer, but at least there was a bath drawn, and Geder didn't shiver as he pulled off his soiled

clothes. The others shed the gloves and jackets that had been contaminated by touching Geder, and a Timzinae slave boy took it all away.

"We, my friends, are the pride and hope of Antea," Klin said as he filled a deep flagon with wine.

"To King Simeon!" Gospey said.

Klin pressed the flagon into Geder's hand and stood with the wineskin in his own.

"To Kingdom and Empire," he said. "And confusion to the upstart in Vanai!"

The others rose. Geder stood in his bath, water running down him, because to stay seated would have been a petty treason. It was the first toast of many. Sir Alan Klin was many things, but stingy with his wine wasn't one. And if Geder had the sense that his flagon was always a little more filled than the other men's, it was surely only a sign of the captain's contrition, an apology for the evening's prank.

Sodai declaimed his latest sonnet, a bawdy tribute to one of the more popular road whores who followed the campaign. Klin topped the performance by extemporizing a speech on the manly virtues of strength at arms, cultured arts, and sexual prowess. Jorey and Gospey pounded out a merry song on drum and reed organ, their voices harmonizing beautifully. When the turn came to Geder, he rose from the tepid bath, recited an explicit rhyme, and did the little jig that went with it. It was something his father had taught him once when they were deep in their cups, and Geder had never shared it outside the family. It wasn't until he finished, the other men helpless in their laughter, that it occurred to him how very drunk he must be to have repeated it here. He smiled to hide the sudden stab of anxiety. Had he just become complicit in his own humiliation? The smile goaded them on to new hilarity, until Klin, breathless, pounded the floor and gestured that Geder should sit.

There was cheese and sausage, more wine, flatbread and pickles, more wine. They talked about things that Geder could hardly follow at the time, much less recall later. At some point, he found himself going on with a drowsy gravity about the Drowned as artistic expression, or possibly aesthetic intention.

He woke in his own waxed-cloth tent, cold and aching and without memory of coming back to it. The thin, unkind light of the coming dawn pressed in through the cloth. A breeze whistled. Geder pulled his blanket up around his head like a fishwife's kerchief and willed himself back to sleep for just a few minutes more. The lingering tendrils of dream teased his mind, but the blare of the assembly call ended all hope of rest. Geder struggled up, put on a fresh uniform, and pulled back his hair. His guts were in riot. His head was in a debate

between pain and illness. If he vomited inside the tent, no one would see it, but his squire would have to clean it up before they struck down for the day's ride. If he went outside, he'd almost certainly be seen. He wondered how much he'd drunk the night before. The second assembly call came. No time for it now. He gritted his teeth and set out once again for the captain's tent.

The company stood in order, Kalliam, Allintot, and two dozen other knights, many of them already in chain and show plate. Behind each, their sergeants and men-at-arms arranged in five ranks deep. Geder Palliako tried to stand straight and true, knowing that the men behind him were judging their chances of glory and survival by his competence. Just as his depended on the captain, and above him Lord Ternigan, the High Marshal who commanded the whole of the army.

Sir Alan Klin stepped out of his tent. In the cool light of morning, he looked like the perfect warrior. His pale hair was drawn back. His uniform was a black so deep it seemed like a sheet cut from midnight. His broad shoulders and jutting chin were a memorial statue brought to life. Two camp slaves brought a speaking dais and set it at the man's feet. The captain stepped up.

"Men," he said. "Yesterday, Lord Ternigan sent new orders. Vanai has entered into alliance with Maccia. Our reports are that six hundred sword-and-bows are on the march to reinforce Vanai even as we speak."

The captain paused to let that sink in, and Geder frowned. Maccia was an odd sort of ally for Vanai. The two cities had been at each other's throats over the spice and tobacco trades for more than a generation. Vanai was built of wood, he'd read, mostly *because* Maccia controlled the quarries while timber floated down the river from the north. But perhaps there was something more going on than he knew.

"These reinforcements will not save Vanai," Alan said. "Especially because when they arrive, they shall find us in control of the city."

Geder felt his frown deepen, and a sense of sick foreboding rise in his gut. It was perhaps five days by water from Maccia to Vanai, and they were at least a week from the border. To reach Vanai before the reinforcements meant…

"Today, we begin a hard march," Alan said. "We will sleep in our saddles. We will eat while we walk. And in four days' time, we will take Vanai by surprise and show her what the power of the Severed Throne means! To the King!"

"To the King!" Geder said in chorus with the others, raising his hand in salute even as he tried not to weep.

They had known. Last night, they had known. Already, Geder could feel the ache growing in his spine and his thighs. The throbbing in his head redoubled. As the formation broke, Jorey Kalliam met his eyes

and then looked away.

Here was the prank. Being tipped into the sludge of the latrine had only been the start. After that, insist on the buffoon accepting apology. Get him in warm water. Fill him full of wine. Make him dance. The memory of reciting his father's dirty rhymes and dancing the little jig came back like a knife in his back. And all so that they could announce the forced march while fat idiot Palliako tried not to puke himself at formation. They'd taken his last night of sleep, and for days they would have the pleasure of watching him suffer.

The camaraderie of the sword. The brotherhood of the campaign. Warm, meaningless words. It was no different here than back home. The strong mocked the weak. The handsome pitied the plain. Everywhere and aways, the powerful chose who was in favor and who could be made light of. Geder turned and stalked back to his tent. His squire had the slaves ready to strike it. He ignored them and walked into his last moment's privacy before the battle that was still days away. He reached for his book.

It wasn't where he'd left it.

A chill that had nothing to do with autumn ran down his spine.

He'd been drunk when he came back. He might have moved it. He might have tried to read it before he slept. Geder searched his cot, then under his cot. He looked through his uniforms and the wood and leather chest that held all his other things. The book wasn't there. He found himself breathing faster. His face felt hot, but whether it was shame or anger, he couldn't let himself think. He stepped out of his tent, and the slaves jumped to attention. The rest of the camp was already being loaded onto wagons and mules. There wasn't time. Geder nodded to his Dartinae squire, and the slaves got to work putting his things in order. Geder walked across the camp again, his steps slowed by fear. But he had to have his book back.

The captain's tent was already struck, the leather unfastened from the frames, the frames broken down and stowed. The bare patch of earth where Geder had capered last night was like a thing from a children's story, a fairy castle that vanished with the dawn. Except that Sir Alan Klin was there, his leather riding cloak hanging from his shoulders and his sword of office at his hip. The master of provender, a half-Yemmu mountain of a man, was taking orders from the captain. Geder's rank technically gave him the right to interrupt, but he didn't. He waited.

"Palliako," Klin said. The warmth of the previous night was gone.

"My lord," Geder said. "I'm sorry to bother you, but when I woke up this morning… after last night…"

"Spit it out, man."

"I had a book, sir."

Sir Alan Klin closed his noble, long-lashed eyes.

"I thought we'd finished with that."

"We did, sir? So you know the book? I showed it to you?"

The captain opened his eyes, glancing about at the ordered chaos of the breaking camp. Geder felt like a boy bothering a harried tutor.

"Speculative essay," Klin said. "Palliako, really? Speculative essay?"

"More for the exercise in translation," Geder lied, suddenly ashamed of his true enthusiasm.

"It was… courageous of you to admit the vice," Klin said. "And I think you made the right decision in destroying it."

Geder's heart knocked against his ribs.

"Destroying it, sir?"

Alan looked at him, surprise on his face. Or possibly mock surprise.

"We burned it last night," the captain said. "The two of us together, just after I took you back to your tent. Don't you remember?"

Geder didn't know whether the man was lying or not. The night was a blur. He remembered so little. Was it possible that, lost in his cups, he had forsworn his little failure of sophistication and permitted it to be set to fire? Or was Sir Alan Klin, his captain and commander, lying to his face? Neither seemed plausible, but one or the other had to be true. And to admit not knowing was to confess that he couldn't hold his wine and prove again that he was the joke of the company.

"I'm sorry, sir," Geder said. "I must have been a little muddled. I understand now."

"Be careful with that."

"It won't happen again."

Geder saluted, and then, before Klin could respond, stalked off to his mount. It was a gelding grey, the best his family could afford. He lifted himself to the saddle and yanked the reins. The horse turned sharply, surprised by his violence, and Geder felt a stab of regret through his rage. It wasn't the animal's fault. He promised himself to give the beast a length of sugarcane when they stopped. If they stopped. If this twice-damned campaign didn't drag on to the end of all days and the return of the dragons.

They took to the road, the army moving at the deliberate pace of men who knew the walk wouldn't end. The hard march began, rank following rank down the wide, dragon's jade road. Geder sat high in his saddle, holding his spine straight and proud out of sheer will and anger. He had been humiliated before. Likely he would be humiliated again. But Sir Alan Klin had burned his book. As the morning sun rose, the heat drawing cloaks from shoulders, the glorious leaves of autumn glowing around them, Geder realized that he had already sworn his oath of vengeance. And he'd done it standing before his new and mortal enemy.

It won't happen again, he'd said.
And it wouldn't.

Cithrin Bel Sarcour Ward of the Medean Bank

Cithrin's only vivid memory of her parents was being told of their deaths. Before that, there were only wisps, less than ghosts, of the people themselves. Her father was a warm embrace in the rain and the smell of tobacco. Her mother was the taste of honey on bread and the thin, graceful hand of a Cinnae woman stroking Cithrin's leg. She didn't know their faces or the sounds of their voices, but she remembered losing them.

She had been four years old. Her nursery had been painted in white and plum. She'd been sitting by the window, drinking tea with a stuffed Tralgu made of brown sacking and stuffed with dried beans. She'd been straightening its ears when her Nanné came in, face even paler than usual, and announced that the plague had taken master and mistress, and Cithrin was to prepare herself to leave. She would be living somewhere else now.

She hadn't understood. Death was something negotiable to her then, like whether or not to wear a particular ribbon in her hair, or how much sweet oats to eat in the morning. Cithrin hadn't cried so much as felt annoyance with the change of plan.

It was only later, in her new, darker rooms above the banking house, that she realized it didn't matter how loud she screamed or how violently she wept. Her parents would never come to her because, being dead, they didn't care anymore.

You worry too much," Besel said.

He reclined, splayed out, looking utterly comfortable on the worn wooden steps. He looked comfortable anywhere. His twenty-one summers made him four years older than Cithrin, and he had dark, curly hair and a broad face that seemed designed for smiling. His shoulders were as thick as a laborer's, but his hands were soft. His tunic, like her own dress, was dyed the red and brown of the bank. It looked better on him. Cithrin knew he had half a dozen lovers, and she was secretly jealous of every one of them.

They were sitting on a wooden bench above the Arched Square, looking down at the bustle and clutter of the weekly fresh market, hundreds of tightly packed stalls of bright cloth and thin sticks growing out from the buildings at the square's edge like new growth on an old tree. The grand canal of Vanai lapped at the quay on their

right, the green water busy with narrow boats and pole barges. The market buzzed with the voices of the fishmongers and butchers, farmers and herbmen, all hawking their late summer harvest.

Most were Firstblood and black-chitined Timzinae, but here and there Cithrin caught sight of the pale, slight body of a full-blooded Cinnae, the wide head and mobile, houndlike ears of a Tralgu, the thick, waddling gait of a Yemmu. Growing up in Vanai, Cithrin had seen at least one example of nearly every race of mankind. Once, she had even seen one of the Drowned in a canal, staring up at her with sorrowful black eyes.

"I don't understand how the bank can side with Imperial Antea," she said.

"We're not siding with them," Besel said.

"We're not siding with the prince. This is a *war*."

Besel laughed. He had a good laugh. Cithrin felt a moment's anger, and then immediately forgave him when he touched her hand.

"This is a theater piece," he said. "A bunch of men are going to meet on a field outside the city, wave sticks and swords at each other, tumble about enough to satisfy honor, and then we'll open the gates to the Antean army and let them run things for a few years."

"But the prince—"

"Exiled. Or imprisoned, but probably exiled. This goes on all the time. A baroness in Gilea marries a prince in Asterilhold, and King Simeon decides Antea needs a counterbalance in the Free Cities. So he finds a reason to declare war on Vanai."

Cithrin frowned. Besel seemed so amused, so unconcerned. By his light, her fear seemed naïve. Foolish. She dug in her heels.

"I've read about wars. The history tutor doesn't make it sound like that at all."

"Maybe real wars are different," Besel said with a shrug. "If Antea ever marches on Birancour or the Keshet, I'll pull all wagers. But this? It's less than a spring storm, little bird."

A woman's voice called Besel's name. A merchant's daughter wearing a deep brown bodice and full skirts of undyed linen. Besel rose from Cithrin's side.

"My work's before me," he said with a glimmer in his eye. "You should get back to the house before old Cam starts getting anxious. But seriously, trust Magister Imaniel. He's been doing this longer than any of us, and he knows what he's about."

Cithrin nodded, then watched as Besel took the steps two at a time, down to the dark-haired girl. He bowed before her, and she curtseyed, but it all looked false to Cithrin. Formality used as foreplay. Likely Besel didn't think Cithrin knew what foreplay was. She watched sourly as he took the woman by the elbow and led her away into the

pale streets and bridges of the city. Cithrin plucked at her sleeves, wishing—not for the first time—that the Medean bank had adopted colors that flattered her more. Something green, for instance.

If her parents had both been Firstblood or Cinnae, she might have had family to take her in. Instead, her father's titles in Birancour had been reclaimed by the queen and awarded to someone else. Her mother's clan in Princip C'Annaldé had politely declined to take a half-blood child.

If not for the bank, she would have been turned into the streets and alleys of Vanai. But her father had placed a part of his gold with Magister Imaniel, and as inheritor, Cithrin became the bank's ward until she was old enough to press her bloodied thumb to contracts of her own. Two more summers, it would be. She would see her nineteenth solstice, become a woman of property, and move, she supposed, out of the little apartments near the Grand Square where the Vanai branch of the Medean bank did its business.

Assuming, of course, that the invading army left the city standing.

Walking through the fresh market, she saw no other particular signs of fear on the faces around her. So perhaps Besel was right. God knew the man seemed sure of himself. But then, he always did.

She let herself wonder whether Besel would see her differently when she wasn't the bank's little girl any longer. She paused at a stall where a Firstblood woman sold perfumes, oils, and colored hair-cloths. A mirror hung on a rough wood post, inviting the customers to admire themselves. Cithrin considered herself for a moment, lifting her chin the way women with real families might.

"Oh, you poor thing," the woman said. "You've been sick, haven't you? Need something for your lips?"

Cithrin shook her head, stepping back. The woman snatched her by the sleeve.

"Don't run off. I'm not afraid. Half my clients are here because they've been unwell. We can wash that pale right off you, dear."

"I haven't," Cithrin said, finding her voice.

"Haven't?" the woman said, steering her toward a stool at the stall's inner corner. The scent of roses and turned earth made the air almost too thick to breathe.

"I'm not sick," she said. "My mother's Cinnae. It's… it's normal."

The woman cast a pitying look at her. It was true. Cithrin had neither the delicate, spun-glass beauty of her mother's people nor the solid, warm, earthy charms of a Firstblood girl. She was in between. The white mule, the other children had called her. Neither one thing nor the other.

"Well, all the more, then," the woman said consolingly. "Just sit you down, and we'll see what we can do."

In the end, Cithrin bought a jar of lip rouge just so she could leave the stall.

You could just let him have a bit," Cam said. "He is the prince. It isn't as if you won't know where to find him."

Magister Imaniel looked up from his plate, his expression pleasant and unreadable. The candlelight reflected in his eyes. He was a small man with leathery skin and thin hair who could seem meek as a kitten when he wished, or become a demon of cold and rage. In all her years, Cithrin had never decided which was the mask. His voice now was mild as his eyes.

"Cithrin?" he said. "Why won't I lend money to the prince?"

"Because if he doesn't want to pay you back, you can't make him."

Magister Imaniel shrugged at Cam. "You see? The girl knows. It's bank policy never to lend to people who consider it beneath their dignity to repay. Besides which, who's to say we have the coin to spare?"

Cam shook her head in feigned despair and reached across the table for the salt cellar. Magister Imaniel took another bite of his lamb.

"Why doesn't he go to his barons and dukes, borrow from them?" Magister Imaniel asked.

"He can't," Cithrin said.

"Why not?

"Oh, leave the poor girl alone for once," Cam said. "Can't we have a single conversation without it turning into a test?"

"We have all their gold," Cithrin said. "It's all here."

"Oh dear," Magister Imaniel said, his eyes widening in false shock. "Is that so?"

"They've been coming for months. We've sold letters of exchange to half the high families in the city. For gold at first, but jewels or silk or tobacco… anything worth the trade."

"You're sure of that?"

Cithrin rolled her eyes.

"Everyone's sure of that," she said. "It's all anyone talks about at the yard. The nobles are all swimming away like rats off a burning barge, and the banks are robbing them blind while they do it. When the letters of credit get to Carse or Kiaria or Stollbourne, they aren't going to get back half of what they paid for them."

"It is a buyer's market, that's true," Magister Imaniel said with an air of satisfaction. "But inventory becomes an issue."

After dinner, Cithrin went up to her room and opened her windows to watch the mist rise from the canals. The air stank of the autumn linseed oil painted onto the wood buildings and bridges against the

coming snow and rain. And beneath that, the rich green bloom of algae in the canals. She imagined sometimes that all the great houses were ships floating down a great river, the canals all connected in a single vast flow too deep for her to see.

At the end of the street, one of the iron gates had come loose from its stays, creaking back and forth in the breeze. Cithrin shivered, closed the shutters, changed for bed, and blew out her candle.

Shouts woke her. And then a lead-tipped club banging on the door.

She threw open the shutters and leaned out. The mist had cleared enough that the street was plain before her. A dozen men in the livery of the prince, five of them holding pitch-reeking torches, crowded the door. Their voices were loud and merry and cruel. One looked up, his dark eyes catching hers. The soldier broke into a grin. Cithrin, not knowing what was happening, smiled back uneasily and retreated. Her blood felt cold even before she heard the voices—Magister Imaniel sounding wary, the guard captain laughing, and then Cam's heartbroken cry.

Cithrin ran down the stairway, the dim light of a distant lantern making the corridors a paler shade of black. Part of her knew that running toward the front door was lunacy, that she should be running the other direction. But she'd heard Cam's voice, and she had to know.

The guards were already gone when she reached the door. Magister Imaniel stood perfectly still, a lantern of tin and glass glowing in his hand. His face was expressionless. Cam knelt beside him, her wide fist pressed against her mouth. And Besel—perfect Besel, beautiful Besel—lay on the stone floor, bloody but no longer bleeding. Cithrin felt a shriek growing in the back of her throat, but she couldn't make a sound.

"Get me a cunning man," Magister Imaniel said.

"It's too late," Cam said, her throat thick with tears.

"I didn't ask. Get me a cunning man. Cithrin, come here. Help me carry him in."

There was no hope, but they did as they were told. Cam pulled on a wool cloak and hurried off into the gloom. Cithrin took Besel's heels, Magister Imaniel his shoulders. Together, they hauled the body into the dining room and laid him on the wide wooden table. There were cuts on Besel's face and hands. A deep gouge ran from his wrist almost to his elbow, the sleeve torn by the blade's passage. He didn't breathe. He didn't bleed. He looked as peaceful as a man asleep.

The cunning man came, rubbed powders into Besel's empty eyes, pressed palms to his silent chest, called the spirits and the angels. Besel took one long, ragged breath, but the magic wasn't enough. Magister Imaniel paid the cunning man three thick silver coins and sent him on his way. Cam lit a fire in the grate, the flames giving

Besel the eerie illusion of motion.

Magister Imaniel stood at the head of the table, looking down. Cithrin stepped forward and took Besel's cold and stiffening hand. She wanted badly to cry, but she couldn't. Fear and pain and terrible disbelief raged in her and found no escape. When she looked up, Magister Imaniel's gaze was on her.

Cam spoke. "We should have given it over. Let the prince take what he wants. It's only money."

"Bring me his clothes," Magister Imaniel said. "A clean shirt. And that red jacket he disliked."

His eyes were moving now, darting as if reading words written in the air. Cam and Cithrin exchanged a glance. Cithrin's first, mad thought was that he wanted to wash and dress the body for burial.

"Cam?" Magister Imaniel said. "Did you hear me? Go!"

The old woman heaved herself up from the hearth and trundled quickly into the depths of house. Magister Imaniel turned to Cithrin. His cheeks were flushed, but she couldn't say if it was rage or shame or something deeper.

"Can you steer a cart?" he asked. "Drive a small team? Two mules."

"I don't know," Cithrin said. "Maybe."

"Strip," he said.

She blinked.

"Strip," he said. "Your night clothes. Take them off. I need to see what were working with."

Uncertainly, Cithrin lifted her hands to the stays at her shoulders, undid the knots, and let the cloth fall to the floor. The cold air raised gooseflesh on her skin. Magister Imaniel made small noises in the back of his throat as he walked around her, making some evaluation she couldn't fathom. The corpse of Besel made no move. She felt the echo of shame. It occurred to her that she had never been naked in front of a man before.

Cam's eyes went wide when she returned, her mouth making a little *O* of surprise. And then, less than a heartbeat later, her expression went hard as stone.

"No," Cam said.

"Give me the shirt," Magister Imaniel said.

Cam did nothing. He walked over and lifted Besel's shirt and jacket from her. She didn't stop him. Without speaking, he dropped the shirt over Cithrin's head. The cloth was soft and warm, and smelled of the dead man's skin. The hem dropped down low enough to restore some measure of modesty. Magister Imaniel stood back, and a bleak pleasure appeared at the corners of his eyes. He tossed Cithrin the jacket and nodded that she should put it on.

"We'll need some needlework done," he said, "but it's possible."

“You mustn’t do this, sir,” Cam said. “She’s just a girl.”

Magister Imaniel ignored her, stepping close again to pull Cithrin’s hair back from her face. He tapped his fingers together as if trying to remember something, bent to the fire grate, and rubbed his thumb through the soot. He smudged Cithrin’s cheeks and chin. She smelled old smoke.

“We’ll need something better, but…” he said, clearly speaking only to himself. “Now… what is your name?”

“Cithrin?” she said.

Magister Imaniel barked out a laugh.

“What kind of name is that for a fine strapping boy like yourself? Tag. Your name is Tag. Say that.”

“My name is Tag,” she said.

Magister Imaniel’s face twisted in scorn. “You talk like a girl, Tag.”

“My name is Tag,” Cithrin said, roughening her voice and mumbling.

“Fair,” he said. “Only fair. But we’ll work on it.”

“You can’t do this,” Cam said.

Magister Imaniel smiled. It didn’t reach his eyes.

“The prince has crossed a line,” he said. “The policy of the bank is clear. He gets nothing.”

“You *are* the policy of the bank,” Cam said.

“And I am *clear*. Tag, my boy? A week from now, you are going to go to Master Will, down in the Old Quarter. He’s going to hire you to drive a cart in a caravan bound for Northcoast. Undyed wool cloth he’s moving to keep from losing it in the war.”

Cithrin didn’t nod or shake her head. The world was spinning a little, and everything had the sense of being part of a terrible dream.

“When you reach Carse,” Magister Imaniel continued, “you take the cart to the holding company. I’ll give you a map and directions. And a letter that will explain everything.”

“It’s weeks on the road!” Cam shouted. “Months, if there’s snow in the pass.”

Magister Imaniel turned, rage lighting his eyes. His voice was low and cold.

“What would you have me do? Keep her here? She’s no safer in our beds than passing for a carter in a caravan. And I will *not* simply accept the loss.”

“I don’t understand,” Cithrin said. Her voice sounded distant in her ears, as if she were shouting over surf.

“The prince’s men are watching us,” Magister Imaniel said. “I must assume they’re watching anyone in the bank’s employ. And, I expect, the bank’s ward, Cithrin the half-Cinnae. Tag the Carter, on the other hand…”

"The carter?" Cithrin said, echoing him more than thinking thoughts of her own.

"The cart's false," Cam said, her voice thick with despair. "Besel was set to take it. Smuggle out all the money we can."

"The gold?" Cithrin said. "You want *me* to take the gold to Carse?"

"Some, yes," Magister Imaniel said. "But gold's heavy. We're better sending gems and jewelry. They're worth more. Spices. Tobacco leaf. Silk. Things light enough they'll pack tight and won't break the axles. And the account books. The real ones. As for the coins and ingots… well, I'll think of something."

He smiled like the mask of a smile. Besel's corpse seemed to shift its shoulders in the flickering light. A draught of cold air rubbed against her bare thighs, and the knot in her belly tightened until she tasted vomit in the back of her mouth.

"You can do this thing, my dear," Magister Imaniel said. "I have faith in you."

"Thank you," she said, swallowing.

Cithrin walked through the streets of Vanai, her stomach in knots. The false mustache was the sort of thin, weedy thing a callow boy might cultivate and be proud of. Her clothes were a mix of Besel's shirts and jackets resewn in the privacy of the bank and whatever cheap, mended rags could be scrounged. They hadn't dared to buy anything new. Her hair was tea-stained to an almost colorless brown and combed forward to obscure her face. She walked with the wider gait Magister Imaniel had taught her, a knot of uncomfortable cloth held tight against her sex to remind her that she was supposed to have a cock.

She felt worse than foolish. She felt like a mummer in clown face and comic shoes. She felt like the most obvious fraud in the city, or the world. And every time she closed her eyes, Besel's corpse waited for her. Every voice that called out started her heart skipping faster. She waited for the knife, the arrow, the lead-tipped cudgel. But the streets of Vanai didn't notice her.

Everywhere, the final preparations for the war were being made. Merchants nailed their windows closed. Wagons clogged the streets as families who had chosen not to flee to the countryside changed their minds and left and others that had gone changed their minds and returned. Criers in the service of the prince announced the improbable thousand men on the march now from their new allies, and the old Timzinae men by the quayside laughed and said they'd all be better off Antean than married to Maccia. Press gangs scattered people before them like wolves snapping at hens. And in the Old Quarter, the

tall, dark, richly carved doors of Master Will's shop were flung wide. The street was jammed with carts and wagons, mules and horses and oxen. The caravan was forming in the square, and Cithrin made her way through the press of the crowd toward the wide, leather-capped form of Master Will.

"Sir," she said in a soft, low voice. Master Will didn't answer, and so uncertainly she tugged at his sleeve.

"What?" the old man said.

"My name's Tag, sir. I've come to drive Magister Imaniel's cart."

Master Will's eyes went wide for a moment and he glanced around to see if they'd been heard. Cithrin cursed silently. Not Magister Imaniel's cart. The bank didn't have a cart. She was driving the wool cart. It was her first mistake. Master Will coughed and took her by the shoulder.

"You're late, boy. I thought you might not come."

"Sorry, sir."

"For God's sake, child, try not to talk."

He led her quickly through the press to a deep, narrow cart. The weathered wood planks looked sturdy enough, and a canvas tarp over the top would keep the rain off the bolts of tight-packed grey cloth. The axles were thick iron, and the wheels bound with steel. It looked to Cithrin like obviously more of a wagon than mere cloth would need. The two mules in harness hardly seemed enough to pull a thing that big. Surely, *surely* they could all see through the sham. The prince's guards hardly needed to glance at her to understand everything. Her gut tightened harder, and she thanked the angels she hadn't been able to eat that morning. She didn't know how well her false whiskers would survive vomiting. Master Will leaned close to her, his lips brushing against her ear.

"The first two layers are wool," he said. "Everything beneath that's in sealed boxes and casks. If the tarp fails and things get wet, just let them stew."

"The books—" she muttered.

"The books are in enough sheepskin and wax you could drive this bastard into the sea. Don't worry about them. Don't think about what you're hauling. And do not under any circumstances dig down and have a look."

She felt a passing annoyance. Did he think she was stupid?

"You can sleep on top," Master Will continued. "No one will think it odd. Do what the caravan master says, keep the mules healthy and fed, and keep to yourself as much as you can."

"Yes, sir," she said.

"Right, then," the old man said. He stood back and clapped her on the shoulder. His smile was forced and mirthless. "Good luck."

He turned and walked back toward his shop. Cithrin had the powerful urge to call after him. This couldn't be all there was. There must be something else she was supposed to do, some preparation or advice she should have. She swallowed, hunched forward, then walked around the cart. The mules met her eyes incuriously. They, at least, weren't frightened.

"I'm Tag," she said into their long, soft ears. And then, whispering, "I'm really Cithrin." She wished she knew their names.

She didn't catch sight of the soldiers until she'd climbed up to the driver's bench. Men and women in hard leather, swords at their sides. They were Firstblood, apart from one Tralgu with rings in his ears and a huge bow slung on his shoulder. The captain of the troop, the Tralgu, and an older man in long robes and tightly knotted hair were talking animatedly with the Timzinae caravan master. Cithrin gripped the reins, her knuckles aching and bloodless. The captain nodded toward her, and the caravan master shrugged. She watched in horror as the three soldiers came toward her. She had to run. She was going to be killed.

"Boy!" the captain said, his pale eyes on her. He was a hard-faced man younger than Magister Imaniel and older than Besel. He wore his sandy hair too short for Antean style, too long for the Free Cities. He leaned forward, his eyebrows rising. "Boy? You hear me?"

Cithrin nodded.

"You aren't dim, are you? I didn't sign on to guard boys who are likely to wander off on their own."

"No," Cithrin croaked. She coughed, careful to keep her voice husky and low. "No, sir."

"Right, then," the captain said. "You're driving this cart?"

Cithrin nodded.

"Well. Good. You're the last to come, so you missed the introductions before. I'll keep it brief. I'm Captain Wester. This is Yardem. He's my second. And that's our cunning man, Master Kit. We're guard on this 'van, and I'd be obliged if you did whatever we said, whenever we said it. We'll get you through safe to Carse."

Cithrin nodded again. The captain mirrored her, clearly not yet convinced she wasn't dim.

"Right," he said, turning away. "Let's get going."

"Anything you say, sir," the Tralgu said in a deep, gravelly voice.

The captain and the Tralgu turned and walked back toward the caravan master, their voices quickly lost in the cacophony of the street. The cunning man, Master Kit, stepped closer. He was older, his hair more grey than black. His face was long and olive-complected. His smile was surprisingly warm.

"Are you all right, son?" he asked.

“Nervous,” Cithrin said.

“First time driving on a ’van?”

Cithrin nodded. She felt like an idiot, nodding all the time like a mute in the streets. The cunning man’s smile was reassuring and gentle as a priest’s.

“I suspect you’ll find the boredom’s the worst thing. After the third day seeing just the cart in front of you, the view may get a bit dull.”

Cithrin smiled and almost meant it.

“What’s your name?” the cunning man asked.

“Tag,” she said.

He blinked, and she thought his smile lost a degree of warmth. She bent her head forward, her hair almost covering her eyes, and her heart began to race. Master Kit only sneezed and shook his head. When he spoke, his voice was still comforting as soft flannel.

“Welcome to the ’van, Tag.”

She nodded again, and the cunning man walked away. Her heart slowed to a more human pace. She swallowed, shut her eyes, and willed her shoulders and neck to relax. She hadn’t been found out. It would be fine.

The wagons started out within the hour, a great wide feed wagon lumbering along at the head, then a covered wagon that clanked loud enough Cithrin could hear it from her perch three back. The Timzinae caravan master rode back and forth on a huge white mare, tapping wagons and drivers and beasts with a long, flexible rod, half stick and half whip. When he came to her, she shook the reins and called out to the mules the way Besel had taught her back when he’d been alive and smiling and flirting with the poor ward of the bank. The mules started forward, and the caravan master shouted at her angrily.

“Not so fast, boy! You’re not in a damned race here!”

“Sorry,” Cithrin said, pulling back. One of the mules snorted and looked back at her. She had a hard time not imagining annoyance in the slant of its ears. She moved them forward again more slowly. The caravan master shook his head and cantered back to the next wagon. Cithrin held the reins in a fierce grip, but there was nothing she had to do. The mules knew their work, following the cart before them. Slowly, with many shouts and imprecations, the caravan took form. They moved from the wide streets of the Old Quarter, past the canals that led down to the river, across the Patron’s Bridge, the prince’s palace high above them.

Vanai, the city of her childhood, slipped past her. There was the road that led to the market where Cam had bought her honey bread for her birthday. Here, the stall where an apprentice cobbler had stolen a kiss from her and been whipped by Magister Imaniel for his trouble. She’d forgotten that until now. They passed the tutor’s house

where she'd gone to study numbers and letters when she was just a girl. Somewhere in the city were the graves of her mother and father. She had never visited the corpses, and she regretted it now.

When she came back, she told herself. When the war was over and the world safe, she'd come back and see where her family was buried.

Too soon, the city wall loomed up before them, pale stone as high as two men standing. The gate was open, but the traffic on the road slowed them. The mules seemed to expect it and stood patiently as the caravan master rode to the front to clear the way, whipping at whatever was in the 'van's path. High on the tower gate, a man stood in the bright armor of the prince's guard. For a sickening moment, Cithrin thought it was the same grinning face that had looked up at her the night Besel died. When the guard called out, it was to the captain.

"You're a coward, Wester!"

Cithrin caught her breath, shocked by the casual insult.

"Die of the pox, Dossen," the captain sang back, grinning, so perhaps the two were friends. The idea made her like Captain Wester less. The prince's guard didn't stop them, at least. The carts rolled and bumped and creaked their way out of the city and onto the road where they left the stone cobbles for the wide green of dragon's jade. Carse lay far to the north and west, but the road here tracked south, echoing the distant curve of the sea. A few other carts passed, traveling in toward the city. The low hills were covered with trees in the glory of their autumn leaves; red and yellow and gold. When the sun struck them at the proper angle, it looked like fire. Cithrin hunched on her bench, her legs growing colder, her hands stiff.

Over the long, slow miles her anxiety faded, lulled by the rumble and rocking of the cart. She could almost forget who she was, what was behind her, and what was in the cart with her. As long as the world was her, the mules, the cart before and the trees beside, it was almost like being alone. The sun tracked lower, shining into her eyes until she was as good as blind. The caravan master's call slowed the carts, then stopped them. The Timzinae rode down the line of carts as he had in Vanai, pointing each of them to a place in a low, open field. The camp. Cithrin's place, thankfully, was near the road where she didn't need to do anything fancy. She turned the mules, brought the cart where she'd been told, and then climbed down to the earth. She unhitched the mules and led them to a creek where they stuck their heads down to the water and kept them there so long she started to grow nervous. Would a mule drink enough to make itself sick? Should she try to stop them? But the other animals were doing the same. She watched what the other carters did and tried not to stand out.

Night came quickly and cold. By the time she'd fed her animals,

scrubbed them, and set them in the 'van's makeshift corral, a mist had risen. The caravan master had set up a fire, and the smell of smoke and grilling fish brought Cithrin's stomach suddenly and painfully to life. She joined the carters laughing and talking in the line for food. She kept her head bowed, her eyes downcast. When anyone tried to bring her into the conversation, she grunted or spoke in monosyllables. The 'van's cook was a short Timzinae woman so fat the chitin of her scales seemed ready to pop free of her sausage-shaped arms. When Cithrin reached the front of the line, the cook handed her a tin plate with a thin strip of pale trout-flesh, a heaping spoonful of beans, and a crust of brown bread. Cithrin nodded in a mime of gratitude and went to sit at the fire. The damp soaked her leggings and jacket, but she didn't dare move in nearer to the warmth. Better to keep to the back.

As they ate, the caravan master pulled a low stool out from his own cart and stood on it, reading from a holy book by the light of the fire. Cithrin listened with only half her attention. Magister Imaniel was a religious too, or else thought it wise to appear so. Cithrin had heard the scriptures many times without ever finding God and angels particularly moving.

Quietly, she put down plate and knife and went out to the creek. How to visit the latrine without giving herself away had been a haunting fear, and Magister Imaniel's dismissive answers—*All men squat to shit*—hadn't reassured her. Alone in the mist and darkness, leggings around her ankles and codpiece stuffing in hand, she felt relief not only in her flesh. Once. She'd gotten away with it once. Now if she could only keep the charade up for the weeks to Carse.

Coming back to the fire, she saw a man sitting beside her plate. One of the guards, but thankfully not the captain or his Tralgu second. Cithrin took her seat again and the guard nodded to her and smiled. She hoped he wouldn't talk.

"Quite the talker, our 'van master," the guard said. "He projects well. Would have made a good actor, except there aren't many good Timzinae roles. Orman in the Fire Cycle, but that's about it."

Cithrin nodded and took a bite of cold beans.

"Sandr," the guard said. "That's me. My name's Sandr."

"Tag," Cithrin said, hoping that between mumbling and her full mouth, she'd sound enough like a man.

"Good meetin' you, Tag," Sandr said. He shifted in the darkness, hauling out a leather skin. "Drink?"

Cithrin shrugged the way she imagined a carter might, and Sandr grinned and popped the stopper free. Cithrin had drunk wine in temple and during festival meals, but always with water, and never very much. The liquid that poured into her mouth now was a different

thing. It bit at the softest parts of her lips and tongue, slid down her throat, and left her feeling as if she'd been cleaned. The warmth that spread through her chest was like a blush.

"Good, isn't it?" Sandr said. "I borrowed it from Master Kit. He won't mind."

Cithrin took another drink then reluctantly handed it back. Sandr drank as the caravan master reached the end of his reading, and half a dozen voices rose up in the closing rite. The moon seemed soft, the mist scattering its light. To her surprise, the wine was untying the knot in her stomach. Not much, but enough that she could feel it. The warmth in her chest was in her belly now too. She wondered how much of the skin she'd have to down to bring the feeling to her shoulders and neck.

She couldn't be stupid, though. She couldn't get herself drunk. Someone shouted out Sandr's name and the guard leapt to his feet. He didn't pick up the skin.

"Over here, sir," Sandr said, walking in toward the fire. Wester and his Tralgu were gathering up their soldiers. Cithrin looked out into the grey and shifting darkness, in toward the fire, and then carefully, casually scooped up the wineskin, tucking it into her jacket.

She walked back to her cart, avoiding the others as she went. Someone was singing, and another voice lifted to join the song. A night bird called out. Cithrin clambered up. Dew was forming on the wool cloth, tiny droplets catching the glow of the moon. She wondered whether she ought to lower the tarp, but it was dark, and she didn't particularly want to. Instead, she snuggled into among the bolts, snuck the wineskin out of her jacket, and had just one more drink. A small one and only one.

She had to be careful.

Dawson Kalliam Baron of Osterling Fells

The sword's arc changed at the last second, the steel blade angling up toward his face. Had Dawson been as young as his opponent, the move would have had its intended effect: he would have flinched back from it, turned, and left himself open. But he had been dueling for too many years. He shifted his own blade an inch to the side and pushed the unexpected thrust a hair's breadth wide of its mark.

Feldin Maas, Baron of Ebbinbaugh and Dawson's opponent in this little battle as in everything, spat on the ground and grinned.

The original slight had been a small one. Despite Dawson having a greater landholding, Maas had demanded to be served before him at the king's court three days before on the strength of having been named Warden the Southern Reach. Dawson had explained Maas's mistake. Maas had made an insult of his concession. The pair of them had come near blows there in the great hall. And so the question was to be resolved here, in the fashion of old.

The dueling yard was a dry, dusty ground long enough for jousting and narrow enough for a meeting like this one: short blades and dueling leathers. To one side, the great walls and towers of the Kingspire rose up, taller than trees. To the other, the Division a thousand feet deep that split the city and gave the Severed Throne its name.

They disengaged and resumed the slow, tense circling. Dawson's right arm was so tired it felt as if it was burning, but the tip of his sword didn't waver. It was a point of pride that after thirty years on the field of honor, he was still as strong as the first day he'd stepped in. The younger man's blade was slightly less steady, his form apparently more careless. It was a physical lie, and Dawson knew better than to believe it.

Their leather-soled boots hushed against the earth. Feldin thrust. Dawson parried, counterthrust, and now Feldin stepped back. The grin was less certain, but Dawson didn't let himself feel pleasure. Not until the bastard wore a Kalliam scar. Feldin Maas swung low and hard, twisting the blade fast from the wrist. Dawson parried, feinted to the right and attacked to the left. His form was perfect, but his enemy had already shifted away. They were both too experienced on the battlefield for the old tricks to carry much effect.

Something unexpected was called for.

In a true battle, Dawson's thrust would have been suicidal. It left

him open, off balance, overextended. It was artless, and so it had the effect he'd intended. Feldin leaped back, but too slowly. The resistance of metal cutting skin translated through Dawson's blade.

"Blood!" Dawson called.

In the space of a heartbeat, Dawson saw Feldin's expression go from surprise to rage, from rage to calculation, and from calculation to a cool, ironic mask. For an instant, he still prepared a counterattack. There would be no parrying it. Young Feldin was tempted, Dawson realized. Honor, witnesses, and rule of law aside, Feldin Maas had been tempted to kill him. It made the victory taste all that much better. Feldin stepped back, put his hand to his ribs, and lifted bloodied fingers. The physicians ran forward to assess the damage. Dawson sheathed his sword.

"Well played, old man," Feldin said as they stripped off his shirt. "Using my honor as your armor? That was almost a compliment. You wagered your life on my gentle instincts."

"More your fear of breaking form."

A dangerous glint came to the younger man's eyes.

"Here, we've just finished one duel," the chief physician said. "Let's not have another."

Dawson drew his dagger in salute. Feldin pushed the servants aside and drew his own. The blood pouring down his side was a good sign. This newest scar would be deep. Dawson sheathed his dagger, turned, and left the dueling ground behind him, his honor intact.

Camnipol. The divided city, and seat of the Severed Throne.

From the time of dragons, it had been the seat of Firstblood power in the world. In the dim, burned ages after the great war had brought the former lords of the world low and freed the slave races, Camnipol had been the beacon of light. Black and gold and proud upon her hill, the city had called home the scattered Firstblood. Fortunes might have waxed and waned through the centuries, but the city stood eternal, split by the Division and held by the might of the Kingspire, now the home of King Simeon and the boy prince Aster.

The Silver Bridge spanned the Division from the Kingspire to the noble quarter that topped the western face. The ancient stone rested on a span of dragon's jade no thicker than a hand's width, and permanent as the sun or the sea. Dawson rode in a small horse-drawn carriage, eschewing the newer tradition of being pulled by slaves. The wheels rattled and flocks of pigeons flogged the air below him. He leaned out his window, looking down through the strata of ruins and stone that made the Division's walls. He'd heard it said that the lowest of the ancient buildings, down in the huge midden at the great

canyon's base, were older than the dragons themselves. Camnipol, the eternal city. His city, at the heart of his nation and his race. Apart from his family, Dawson loved nothing better.

And then he had crossed the great span of air, and the driver turned into his narrow private square. His mansion rose up, its clean, sweeping lines elegant free of the gaudy filigree with which upstarts like Feldin Maas, Alan Klin, and Curtin Issandrian tarted up their homes. His home was classic and elegant, and it looked out over the void to the Kingspire and the wide plain beyond it, the noblest house in the city, barring perhaps Lord Bannien of Estinford's estate.

His servants brought out the steps, and Dawson waved away the offered hands as he always did. It was their duty to offer, and his dignity required that he refuse. The ritual was the important thing. The door slave, an old Tralgu with light brown skin and silver hair at the tips of his ears, stood by the entryway. A silver chain bound him to the black marble column.

"Welcome home, my lord," the slave said. "A letter has come from your son."

"Which son?"

"Jorey, my lord."

Dawson felt a twist in his gut. Had it been from one of his other children, he could have read the news with unalloyed pleasure, but a letter from Jorey was a letter from the loathed Vanai campaign. With trepidation, he held out his hand. The door slave turned his head toward the door.

"Your lady wife has it, my lord."

The interior of the mansion was dark tapestry and bright crystal. His dogs bounded down the stairway yipping with excitement; five wolfhounds with shining grey fur and teeth of ivory. Dawson scratched their ears, patted their sides, and walked back to the solarium and his wife.

The glass room was a consolation he gave his Clara. It spoiled the lines of the building on the north side, but she could cultivate the pansies and violets that grew in the hills of Osterling. The reminder of home made her more nearly content during the seasons in Camnipol, and she kept the house smelling of violets all through the winter. She sat now in a deep chair, a small desk at her side, the tables of dark blooms arrayed around her like soldiers on parade. She looked up at the sound of his steps and smiled.

Clara had always been perfect. If the years had taken some of the rose from her cheeks, if her black hair was shot with white, he could still see the girl she had been. There had been rarer beauties and sharper poets when Dawson's father had chosen the womb that would carry his grandchildren. But instead he had picked Clara, and it had

taken Dawson no time at all to appreciate the wisdom of that choice. She was good at heart. She might have been a paragon in all other things, but if she had not been good, those other virtues would have turned to ash. Dawson leaned down, kissing her lips as he always did. It was a ritual like refusing the footman's help and scratching the hounds' ears. It gave life meaning.

"We've heard from Jorey?" he said.

"Yes," she said. "He's fine. He's having a wonderful time in the field. His captain is Adria Klin's boy Alan. He says they're getting along quite nicely."

Dawson leaned against a flower table, arms crossed. The twinge in his belly grew worse. Klin. Another of Feldin Maas's cabal. It had been like a bone in the throat when the king had placed Jorey under the man, and it still brought a little taste of anger thinking of it.

"Oh, and he says he's serving with Geder Palliako, but that can't be right, can it? Isn't that the strange little pudgy man with the enthusiasm for maps and comic rhyme?"

"You're thinking of Lerer Palliako. Geder's his son."

"Oh," Clara said with a wave of her hand. "That makes much more sense, because I couldn't see him going out in the field again at his age. I think we're all well beyond that. And then Jorey also wrote a long passage about horses and plums that's clearly some sort of coded message for you that I couldn't make head or tail of."

After a moment's rooting through the folds of her dress, she held out the folded paper.

"Did you win your little fight?" she asked.

"I did."

"And did that awful man apologize?"

"Better than that, dear. He lost."

Jorey's script dotted the pages like well-regulated bird scratches, neat and sloppy at the same time. Dawson skimmed through the opening paragraphs. A few bluff comments about the rigors of the march, an arch comment about Alan Klin that Clara had either not seen or chosen to misunderstand, a brief passage about the Palliako boy who was apparently something of the company joke. And then the important part. He read it carefully, parsing each phrase, picking out the words he and his son had chosen to represent certain key players and strategems. *There aren't any windfall plums this year.* Meaning Sir Klin was not the client of Lord Ternigan. Klin took his orders because Lord Ternigan was marshal of the army and not through any particular political alliance. That was useful information to know. *My own horse is in real danger of developing a limp on his right side.* Horse, not mount. Limp, not lameness. Right side, not left. So Klin's company was favored to remain in conquered Vanai, and Klin himself the likely

temporary governor. Ternigan wasn't planning to take rule of the city on himself. All the more important, then, that the army stall.

Only *stall,* of course. Not *fail.* Never fail. Everything would be in place, if Ternigan's forces could just withhold victory for a season. That difference between postponement and failure kept his private negotiations with Maccia from crossing the line into treason. As long as the conquest of Vanai was delayed until the spring season, there would be time to get Klin recalled to the court and Jorey put in his place. Governing Vanai would be Jorey's first step up within the court, and it would take some prestige away from Maas and Klin and their type.

Dawson had worked through the most obscure channels he could, had sent letters to agents in Stollbourne who sent letters to merchants in Birancour who had business in Maccia. Discretion was critical, but he had managed it. Six hundred soldiers would reinforce the free city of Vanai until such time as it was convenient that they not. In spring, they would retreat, Vanai would fall, and by summer Dawson would be drinking with King Simeon and laughing together at his cleverness.

"My lord?"

The servant stood in the solarium's doorway, bowing his apology. Dawson folded the letter and handed it back to Clara.

"What is it?"

"A visitor, sir. Baron Maas and his wife."

Dawson snorted, but Clara stood and adjusted her sleeves. Her face took on an almost serene calm, and she smiled at him.

"Now love," she said. "You've had your play at war. Don't begrudge us our play at peace."

Objections sprang to mind like dogs after a fox: dueling wasn't a game, it was honor; Maas had earned the scar and the humiliation that went with it; receiving him now was empty etiquette, and on and on. Clara hoisted an eyebrow and canted her head to the side. All his bluster drained away. He laughed.

"My love," he said, "you civilize me."

"Oh not that, surely," she said. "Now come along and say something pleasant."

The receiving room swam in tapestry. Clothwork images of the Last Battle with the dragon's wings worked in silver thread and Drakis Stormcrow in gold. Sunlight spilled through a wide window of colored glass worked in the heraldic gryphon-and-axe of Kalliam. The furnishings were among the most elegant in the house. Feldin Maas stood by the door as if at attention. His dark-haired, sharp-faced wife flowed forward as Dawson and Clara entered the room.

"Cousin!" she said, taking Clara's hands. "I am so happy to see you."

"Yes, Phelia," Clara said. "I'm sorry that we only ever seem to visit

one another when our boys have been misbehaving."

"Osterling," Feldin Maas said, using Dawson's more formal title.

"Ebbinbaugh," Dawson replied, bowing. Feldin retuned the bow with a stiffness that said the pain of his new cut still bothered him.

"Oh stop it, both of you," Clara said at the same moment Feldin's wife said, "Sit down and have some wine."

The men did as they were told. After a few minutes of chatter, Feldin leaned over, speaking low.

"I hadn't heard whether you were joining the king's tourney."

"Of course I am. Why wouldn't I?"

"I thought you might be leaving some glory for your sons, old friend," Feldin said. "That's all. No offense intended. I don't think I can afford much more of your offense. At least not until I've healed."

"Perhaps next time we should duel with words. Insulting couplets at ten paces."

"Oh, blades will be fine. Your couplets do permanent damage. People still call Sir Lauren the Rabbit Knight because of you."

"Me? No. I could never have done it without his teeth and that ridiculous helmet of his. I know they were supposed to be wings, but by God they looked like ears to me," Dawson said and took a drink. "You acquitted yourself well today, my boy. Not as well as I did, but you're a fighter and no doubt."

Clara rewarded him with a smile. She was right; it wasn't so hard being magnanimous. There was even a kind of warmth in it. The wine was rich, and the servants brought in a plate of dry cheese and pickled sausages. Clara and her cousin gossiped and touched each other's arms and hands at every chance, like children flirting. It was much the same thing, he supposed. First insult, then violence, and reassurance afterward. It was women like theirs who kept the kingdom from bursting apart in a war of ego and manliness.

"We are lucky men," Dawson said, "to have wives like these."

Feldin Maas startled, considered the two women deep in conversation about the difficulty of maintaining households in Camnipol and their family holdings both, and gave a rough half-smile.

"I suppose we are," he said. "How long are you staying in Camnipol?"

"Until the tourney, and then another week or two. I want to get home again before the snows."

"Yes. Nothing like the Kingspire in winter for catching every breath of wind off the plain. It's like his majesty had a sailmaker for an architect. I've heard the king's thinking of touring the reaches just so he can spend some time in a warm house."

"It's the hunting," Dawson said. "Ever since we were boys, he's loved the winter hunts in the reaches."

“Still, he’s getting old for it, don’t you think?”

“No. I don’t.”

“I bow to your opinion,” Feldin said, but his smile was thin and smug. Dawson felt a tug of anger, and Clara must have seen it. Part of peacekeeping, it appeared, was to know how to stop playing at friends before the illusion faded. She called for the servants, gathered a gift of violets for her cousin, and they walked together to the entry hall to say their farewells. Just before he turned away, Feldin Maas frowned and raised a finger.

“I forget, my lord. Do you have family in the Free Cities?”

“No,” Dawson said. “Well, I think Clara has some obscure relations in Gilea.”

“Through marriage,” Clara said. “Not blood.”

“Nothing in Maccia, then. That’s good,” Feldin Maas said.

Dawson’s spine stiffened.

“Maccia? No,” he said. “Why? What’s in Maccia.”

“Apparently the Grand Doge there has decided to throw in with Vanai against his majesty. ‘Unity in the face of aggression’ or some such.”

Feldin knew about Vanai’s reinforcements. And if he knew, so did Sir Alan Klin. Did they know whose influence had brought Vanai its new allies, or did they only suspect? They must at least suspect, or Feldin wouldn’t have brought it up. Dawson smiled the way he hoped he would have if he’d had no stake in the matter.

“Unity among the Free Cities? That seems unlikely,” he said. “Probably just rumor.”

“Yes,” Feldin Maas said. “Yes, I’m sure you’re right.”

The dog-faced, small-cocked, hypocrite bastard son of a weasel and a whore bowed and escorted his wife from the house. When Dawson didn’t move, Clara took his hand.

“Are you well, dear? You look pained.”

“Excuse me,” he said.

Once in his library, he locked the doors, lit the candles, and pulled his maps from their shelves. He’d marked the paths from Maccia to Vanai and the roads the army was sure to take. He measured and made his calculations, fury rising like waves whipped by a storm. He’d been betrayed. Somewhere along the chain of communications, somebody had said something, and his plans had been tipped to the ground. He had overreached, and it left him exposed. He’d been outplayed. By Feldin Maas. One of the dogs whined and scratched at the door until Dawson unlocked it and let it in.

The dog climbed onto the couch, wrapping its haunches in close and looking up at Dawson with anxious eyes. The Baron of Osterling Fells sank down beside the beast and scratched its ears. The dog whined

again, pressing its head up into Dawson's palm. A moment later, Clara appeared in the doorway, her arms folded, her eyes as anxious as the hound's.

"Something's gone wrong?"

"A bit, yes."

"Does it put Jorey in danger?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"Does it put us in danger?"

Dawson didn't reply because the answer was *yes,* and he couldn't bring himself to lie.

Geder

Amist lay on the valley, white in the morning sun. The banners of the houses of Antea hung limp and damp, their colors darkened and greyed by the thick air. The world smelled of trampled mud and the cold. Geder's horse shook its head and grunted. He reached forward a gauntleted hand and patted the beast's shoulder.

His armor had been his father's once, the bright steel of the plate dimmed a little now where the smith had bent it to more nearly fit Geder's back. The straps pinched even through the brigandine. The march had been a long, weary foretaste of hell. The pace had never been fast, but it was relentless. From that first hungover morning, he had ridden and walked for four days without more than two short hours' rest at a time. In the night, he draped a blanket across his shoulders and shivered against the cold. During the day, he sweated. The army passed down the wide green dragon's road, the tramp of feet against the jade becoming first an annoyance, then a music, then an odd species of silence, before cycling around to annoyance again. With only one horse, he had to spend a fair part of each day walking. A richer man would have brought two or three, even four mounts on the campaign. And plate that hadn't seen decades of use before he was born. And a tent that kept out the cold. And, just perhaps, a little respect and dignity.

The other titled nobles rode in groups or with their personal retinue. Geder shared their place at the head of the column, but significantly at the rear of the grouping. The supply carts came just behind him, and the infantry and camp followers behind them, though there weren't many camp followers these days. It said something when a march was too much trouble to be worth a whore's time.

The order to stop had come last evening an hour before sunset. Geder's squire had erected his little tent, brought a tin plate of lentils and cheese, and curled up into a small Dartinae ball just outside Geder's tent flap. Geder had crawled onto his cot, pressed his eyes shut, and prayed for sleep. His dreams had all been about marching. With the first light of dawn, the new order had come: prepare.

All through his boyhood, he had imagined this day. His first real battle. He'd imagined the wind of the charge, the heat and speed of the horse beneath him, the fierce cries of battle in his throat. He hadn't thought about the numbing hours sitting in the saddle, his armor cooling against him, while the infantry formed, shifted, and re-

formed. The noble line of knights, sword and lance at the ready, was a clump of men laughing, trading dirty jokes, and complaining that the food was either sparse or spoiled. It felt less like the noble proving ground of war than the ninth day of an eight-day hunt. Geder's spine was a single burning ache from his ass to the base of his skull. His thighs were chapped raw, his jaw popped every time he yawned, and his mouth tasted like sour cheese. His squire stood by his side, Geder's battle lance in his hands, shield slung across his back, and a wary expression on his hairless face.

"Palliako!"

Geder shifted. Sir Alan Klin rode a huge black charger, the steel of its barding all enameled red. The man's armor glittered with dew and the silver worked into a dragon's wing design. He could have stepped out of an ancient war rhyme.

"My lord?" Geder said.

"You're with the charge on the west. The scouts report it as the mercenary forces Vanai's bought, so it should be the easiest fighting."

Geder frowned. That seemed wrong, but fatigue made it hard to think through. Mercenaries were professional fighters and veterans to a man. And that was where the fighting would be *easy*? Klin read his expression, leaned to the side, and spat.

"They aren't protecting their homes and wives," Klin said. "Just follow where Kalliam goes and try not to knock your horse into anyone. Knees get broken that way."

"I know that."

Klin's pale eyebrows rose.

"I mean… I mean I'll be careful, my lord."

Klin made a clicking sound, and his beautiful charger shook its head and turned. Geder's squire looked up at him. If there was any amusement in the Dartinae's glowing eyes, it was well hidden.

"Come on," Geder said. "Let's get in place."

The hell of it was, what Klin said might be true. Perhaps he was sending Geder and the youngest Sir Kalliam into the easiest part of the coming battle. A charge, a few sword strokes to one side and another, and the paid forces call surrender before anyone got too badly hurt. It would be a mark of Klin's ability if he could have all his knights alive, and increase his own glory by keeping the fiercest fights for himself. Anything to impress Lord Ternigan and stand out from the marshal's other captains. Or perhaps Klin wanted Geder to die in the battle. Geder thought he might be ready to die if it meant not riding anymore.

Jorey Kalliam sat high on his saddle, speaking to his bannerman. His plate was simple steel, unadorned and elegant. Six other knights were with him, their squires all close and ready. Kalliam nodded

solemnly to Geder and he returned the salute.

"Come close," he called. "All of you. To me."

The knights shifted their mounts in. Sir Makiyos of Ainsbaugh. Sozlu Veren and his twin brother Sesil. Darius Sokak, the Count of Hiren. Fallon Broot, Baron of Suderling Heights, and his son Daved. All in all, a pretty sad bunch. He could see from their own expressions that they'd drawn similar conclusions from his arrival.

"The valley narrows about half a league from here," Kalliam said. "The Vanai are there, and they're entrenched. The scouts are saying the banners here on the western edge belong to a mercenary company under a Captain Karol Dannian."

"How many men's he got?"

"Two hundred, but mostly sword-and-bows," Kalliam said.

"Brilliant," Fallon Broot said, stroking the mustache that drooped down past his weak chin. "That should leave enough for all of us to have our turn."

Geder couldn't tell if it was meant as a joke.

"Our work," Kalliam said, "is to hold tight to the edge of the valley. The main thrust will be on the eastern end where Vanai's forces are thickest. Lord Ternigan has all his own knights and half of ours. All we need is to be sure no one flanks them. Sir Klin is giving us three dozen bows and twice as many swords. I've sent the bows ahead. At the signal, they'll start the attack and try to draw out their cavalry. When we hear the charge, we'll go in with the swords following."

"Why are they here?" Geder asked. "I mean, if I were them, I'd try to be behind a wall someplace. Make it a siege."

"Can't hire mercenaries for a siege," one of the Sir Verens said, contempt for the question dripping from his words. "They take contract for a season, and Vanai can't raise money to renew."

"The city's less than an hour's ride from here," Kalliam said, "and there's no place more defensible until you reach it. If they hope to keep us from reaching Vanai, this is the first defense and the last."

A distant horn sang. Two rising notes and one falling. Geder's heart started beating a little faster. Kalliam smiled, but his eyes were cold.

"My lords," Kalliam said. "I believe that's the first call. If you have any last business, it's too late for it now."

The mist hadn't vanished, but enough had burned off that the landscape was clear before them. To Geder's unpracticed eye, it looked like any of the other small valleys they'd passed on their way through the low, rolling hills north of the Free Cities. The enemy was a dark, crawling line like ants from a hill. The other knights' squires began the final preparation, strapping shield to arms, handing up the steel-tipped lances. Geder suffered the same. The Dartinae finished with him, then nodded and prepared his own arms for the battle; light

leather and a long, wicked knife. And not half a league away, some other squire or low soldier was cleaning another knife just as wicked to push through Geder's throat if the chance came. The horn sang again. Not the charge, but the warning of it.

"Good luck, my lord," his squire said. Geder nodded awkwardly in his helm, turned his mount to follow the others, and started down toward the battle. His little gelding whickered nervously. The ants grew larger, and the enemy banners grew clear. He saw where Kalliam's archers were set, hiding behind blinds of wood and leather. Kalliam raised his shield, and the knights stopped. Geder tried to twist back, to see the swordsmen behind them, but his armor forbade it. He squeezed his eyes closed. It was just like a tourney. Joust first, then a little melee. Even a rich mercenary company wasn't likely to have many heavy cavalry. He'd be fine. He needed to piss.

The horns blew the martial doubled note of the charge. Kalliam and the other men shouted and spurred their mounts. Geder did the same, and the tired old gelding that had carried him for days and weeks became a beast made of wind. He felt himself shouting, but the world was a single roar. The archers' blinds flickered by him and were gone, and then the enemy was there; not knights or heavy cavalry, but pikemen bringing their great spears to bear. Sir Makiyos barreled into the line, smashing it, and Geder angled his own attack to take advantage of the chaos.

A horse was screaming. Geder's lance struck a pikeman, the blow wrenching his shoulder, and then he was past the line and into the melee. He dropped his lance, drew his sword, and started hewing away at whatever came close. To his right, one of the Veren twins was being pulled from his horse by half a dozen mercenary swordsmen. Geder yanked his mount toward the falling knight, but then his own swordsmen appeared, pouring through the broken line. He saw his squire loping along, head low and knife at the ready, but there were no men in plate to knock over and let his Dartinae finish. The mass of fighting men pushed to the south. Geder turned again, ready to find someone, but the mercenaries seemed reluctant to press the attack.

He didn't see where the bolt came from. One moment, he was scanning the battle for a likely target, the next a small tree had taken root in his leg, the thick black wood punching through the plate and into the meat of his thigh. Geder dropped his sword and screamed, scrabbling at the bolt in agony. Something hit his shield hard enough to push him back. A drumbeat rolled from the south, low and deep as thunder. The gelding shifted unexpectedly, and Geder felt himself starting to slide out of his saddle. The hand that steadied him was Jorey Kalliam's.

"Where did you come from?" Geder asked.

Kalliam didn't answer. There was blood on the man's face and spattered across his sheild, but he didn't seem injured. His eyes were fixed on the battle, or something beyond it, and his expression was carved from ice. Trying to put aside his pain, Geder followed the boy's gaze. There, dancing above the fray, new banners were flying. The five blue circles of Maccia.

"Never mind you," Geder squeaked. "Where did *they* come from?"

"Can you ride?"

Geder looked down. His gelding's pale side was red with blood, and the flow coming from the bolt in his leg looked wide as a river. A wave of dizziness made him clutch at his saddle. Men could die of leg wounds like that. He was sure he'd heard of men dying from leg wounds. Was he about to die, then?

"Palliako!"

He looked up. The world seemed to swim a little. Jorey Kalliam glanced from the line of battle now surging back toward them to Geder's face.

"I'm hurt," Geder said.

"You are a knight of the empire," Kalliam said, and the power in his voice wasn't anger. "Can you ride, sir?"

Geder felt some part of the other man's strength come into him. The world steadied and Geder steadied with it.

"I can… I can ride."

"Then go. Find Lord Ternigan. Tell him the Maccian banners are flying on the west end of the line. Tell him we need help."

"I will," he said and picked up his reins. Kalliam's mount shifted toward the fight, snorting, but the young knight paused.

"Palliakio! Go directly to Lord Ternigan. *Directly.*"

"Sir?"

"Not to Klin."

Their eyes met for a moment, and an understanding passed between them. Kalliam didn't trust their captain any more than he did. Relief and gratitude surged in Geder's heart, and then surprise at the feelings.

"I understand," he said. "I'll bring help."

Kalliam nodded, turned, and charged for the melee. Geder spurred his horse, riding east across the field. He struggled to unstrap his shield, gauntleted fingers and jouncing horse making the leather and buckles unwieldy. He managed to free his arm at last, and leaned forward, urging the beast faster. An hour ago, the valley had been grass and autumn wildflowers. Now it was churned mud and the roar of brawling men.

Geder squinted. The mist was gone now, but the wet banners were still darkened and clinging to their poles. He had to find the gold and

crimson of House Ternigan. He had to do it now. All around him, men lay in the muck, dead or wounded. The screams of soldiers and horses cut through the air. But the banner of the king's marshal was nowhere.

Geder shouted curses, shifting his gaze one way then the other. He felt cold. His bleeding leg was heavy, blood soaking his brigandine as quickly as the strength left his flesh. Every minute that passed made it less likely Kalliam and the others would survive, and his vision was starting to dance gold and darkness around the edges. He tried to stand higher in his stirrups, but his injured leg couldn't support him. He drove his horse forward. There were the banners of Flor and Rivercourt, Masonhalm and Klin…

Klin. There, not fifty yards from where he sat, the banner of Sir Alan Klin flew wet and limp over a knot of fighting men. And there among them, the huge black warhorse with its red barding. Geder felt a tug. If it was a mistake, if Klin hadn't *meant* to send them to the slaughter, then help was there. Right there. But if it had been his intention, and Geder went to him now, Kalliam and the others were dead. He rode on. His leg was numb. His mouth was dry. There, the banners of Estinford, Corenhall, Dannick.

Ternigan.

He spurred his horse and the gelding leapt forward, running toward the knot of battle that swirled around the banner. He cursed Ternigan for leading the charge instead of hanging back to direct the battle from the rear. He cursed Sir Alan Klin for sending him and Kalliam into the enemy's trap. He cursed himself for having taken off his shield, and for having been wounded, and for not moving fast. An enemy swordsman lurched up out of the muck, and Geder rode him down. He smelled pine smoke. Something, somewhere was burning. The gelding was shaking under him, exhausted, trembling. He apologized silently to the beast and put spurs to it again.

He barreled into the fighting men like a stone thrown through a window. Swordsmen scattered around him, as many of them Antean as Vanai. Ten feet from the bannerman, Lord Ternigan stood high in his saddle, his sword shining in his hand, and soldiers five men deep keeping the enemy from reaching him.

"Lord Ternigan!" Geder shouted. "Ternigan!"

The roar of battle drowned him out. The marshal moved forward, in toward the line where the battle was thickest. A deep crimson rage rolled over Geder's vision. Kalliam and the others were fighting, dying, for this man. The least the bastard could do was pay some attention. He pushed his shuddering mount forward, pressing through the marshal's guard by raw determination. The battlefield narrowed to the one lord on his mount. The edges of Geder's vision contracted, like

he was riding through a tunnel that led to the world. When he came within three yards, he shouted again.

"Maccia, my Lord Ternigan. Maccia's come on the west end, and they're killing us!"

This time, the marshal heard. His head snapped toward Geder, the high, noble forehead furrowed. Geder waved his arms and pointed to the west. *Don't look at me. Look at Maccia.*

"Who are you, sir?" Lord Ternigan said. His voice was as deep as a drum and echoed a bit. The world around it seemed quieter than it should have.

"Sir Geder Palliako. Jorey Kalliam's sent me. West end's not just mercenaries, my lord. Maccia's there. Can't hold them back. Kalliam… Kalliam sent me. You have to help him."

Ternigan shouted something over his shoulder, and the horns blared again, close by and powerful as being slapped in the jaw. Geder opened his eyes again, surprised to find that he'd closed them. People were moving around him. Knights rode past him, streaming toward the west. At least he thought that was west. Lord Ternigan was beside him, holding him hard by one elbow.

"Can you fight, sir?" the Marshal of the Kingdom of Antea asked him from a long way away.

"I can," Geder said, turning in his saddle. Slick with blood, his foot slipped free of the stirrup. Churned mud rose up, but the world went black before it reached him.

Marcus

For the midday meal, the caravan stopped at a clearing with a wide, slow brook. The thin boy, Mikel his name was, sat on the fallen log at Yardem's side. Like the Tralgu, he wore his leathers open at the throat. They both leaned forward over their plates of beans and sausage. The boy's shoulders were set as if bound by muscle they didn't possess and his movements had a slow, deliberate power that his frame didn't justify. Yardem tilted his head down a degree to look at Mikel. With the same gravity, the boy tilted his head up.

"Captain," Yardem said, his ears pressed back. "Make him stop."

Marcus, cross-legged on the ground, fought back a smile. "Stop what?"

"He's been doing this for days, sir."

"Acting like a soldier, you mean?"

"Acting like *me,*" Yardem said.

Mikel made a low noise in his throat. Marcus had to cough to cover his laugh.

"We hired these people to act as guards," Marcus said. "They're acting as guards. Only natural they'd look to us for the details."

Yardem grunted and turned to face the boy. When the boy met his gaze, the Tralgu deliberately flicked an ear.

The forest around them now was oak and ash, the trees taller than ten men. A scrub fire had come through within the last few years, scorching the bark and burning down the underbrush without ever reaching the wide canopy above. Marcus could imagine smoke rising up through green summer leaves. Now the roadside litter was damp, the fallen leaves black with mold and on their way to becoming soil for the next year's weeds. Only the leaves on the road itself were dry. At the eastern end of the clearing, a wide-eyed stone Southling king in battle array and a six-pointed crown was half entombed in an oak. The old bark had swallowed half of the solemn face, roots tilted the wide stone pediment a degree. Vines draped the stone shoulders. Marcus didn't know what the marker had been meant to commemorate.

For almost a week, the caravan had been making good progress. The road was well traveled, local farmers keeping it for the most part clean, but there had still been whole leagues where their way was covered in newly fallen leaves. The rustling of horses' hooves and the crackle of the cart wheels had been loud enough to drown out conversation. The 'van master wasn't bad for a religious. For the most

part, Marcus could ignore the scriptures read over the evening meals. If the Timzinae happened to pick something particularly hard to listen to—sermons on family or children or the assurances that God was just or anything that touched too closely on what had happened to his wife and daughter—Marcus ate quickly and took a long private walk out ahead on the road. He called it scouting, and the 'van master didn't take offense. Other travelers had joined with the 'van and parted company again without more than a look from Yardem or himself to keep the peace. Except that they weren't yet a quarter of the way to the pass that marked the edge of Birancour, the job was going better than expected.

Marcus chewed his last bite of sausage slowly. The dozen carts filled half the clearing, horses and mules with feedbags over their heads or else being led to and from the brook to drink. The carters knew their business for the most part. The old man driving the tin ore was a little deaf and the boy with the high cart of wool cloth was either new to the trade or an idiot or both, but they were the worst. And his acting troupe had worked out magnificently. If he looked at the trees, not considering the people at all, he could still pick out the guards in the sides of his vision, just by their swagger.

By the side of the road, the long-haired woman, Cary, stood with her arms crossed and a huge horn-and-sinew bow slung across her back. Likely she couldn't have drawn the damn thing, but she wore it like the companion of years. Sandr, the young lead, walked among the carts, head high and brow furrowed. He'd been telling stories to the carters about how he'd broken a foot jousting in an Antean tourney, and had become so familiar with the tale he'd adopted a barely noticable limp to go with it. And then there, sitting with the 'van master's fat wife, was his cunning man, Master Kit, without whom Yardem would even now be failing to keep Vanai from falling. Without whom Marcus would have been jailed or killed.

The 'van master's whistle brought Marcus back to himself, and he squinted up into the thin patch of high, white cloud that showed through the canopy above them. Time was harder to judge in the shadows of a forest, but he guessed the meal had run long. Well, his contract was to get them all into Carse safely. On schedule wasn't his problem. Marcus cleaned his plate with a crust of bread and pulled himself up to standing.

"Rear or fore?" Yardem asked.

"I'll take fore," Marcus said.

The Tralgu nodded and lumbered toward the iron merchant's wagon that brought up the rear of the 'van. It would be the last to leave. Marcus checked his blade and his armor with the same care he did before going into battle—an old habit—and went to the 'van master's

tall, broad feed wagon. He climbed up beside the master's wife and settled in for the afternoon's trek. The Timzinae woman nodded to him and blinked her clear inner eyelids.

"That was a fine meal, ma'am," Marcus said.

"You're kind to say so, Captain."

Their conversation complete, she shouted at her horses, flicking her whip lightly at shoulder and haunch to direct them. The wagon lurched forward up onto the road, and then to the west. As they passed into the deep shadows again, Marcus wondered whether Vanai had fallen yet, and if not, how many more days the free city had left. Not many. Another problem not his own.

The rotation was a simple one. Rear and fore were Yardem or Marcus. Master Kit drove his own cart in the center of the 'van with the gaudy colors of the theater draped in cloth. The others rode three on either side of the carts, keeping their eyes on the trees. If anyone saw something suspicious, they'd call out, and Yardem or Marcus would go and look. In a week, the only call they'd had was when Smit, the jack-of-all-roles, had spooked himself with stories about bands of feral Dartinae assassins. Marcus let his eyes narrow, his back rest against the hard wood of the driver's rig. The world smelled of rotting leaves and coming weather, but he couldn't decide yet if it would be rain or snow.

The road made a tight turn at the base of a densely wooded hill. A tree had fallen across the road, its base still white where the axe had cut it. Marcus felt his body tense almost before he knew why.

"Call the stop," he said.

Even before the Timzinae woman could ask why, Smit, Sandr, and Opal all shouted. Marcus turned, scrambling to the top of the wagon. There shouldn't have been bandits. They didn't have anything worth taking. The 'van master's white mare was racing up the side of the carts toward the front. He saw four figures in leather and light chain step out from the trees, bows at the ready. They had hoods covering them, but from the width of their build, Marcus guessed Jasuru or Kurtadam. Four in plain sight could mean the bandits were bluffing. Or that there were a dozen more still in the trees.

At least they hadn't announced themselves with an arrow.

"Hai!" a raspy voice called from the road ahead. "Who speaks for you?"

Four men on horses had appeared in front of the fallen oak. Three were either poorly groomed Cinnae or badly underfed Firstbloods riding nags, but the one in front rode a grey stallion with good lines and real strength in his legs. He also had a steel breastplate and chainmail. His bow was horn, his sword was curved in the southern style, and his face had the broad, thick-boned jaw and bronze scales of

a Jasuru.

The Timzinae caravan master pulled his mare up in front of the supply wagon's team.

"I speak for this 'van," he shouted. "What is the meaning of this?"

Marcus shrugged his shoulders to loosen them. Eight men they could see. Half of those mounted. He had eight men, and six of them on horse. It was a damn small advantage, and if it came to blows, they wouldn't last five long breaths together. He hoped the Timzinae wasn't going to press the bandits too hard.

"I am Lord Knightly Tierentois," the bandit captain said loud enough to carry. "You are traveling in my road, and I have come to collect my due tribute."

Marcus slipped back down to the driver's rig, the impulse to roll his eyes warring with the tightness in his belly. The horseman might be a fake and a blowhard, but he had blades and bows.

"These are dragon's roads," the 'van master shouted. "And you're a half-wit, jumped-up thief in stolen armor. Birancour doesn't have any Jasuru knights."

Well, that wasn't as politic as Marcus had hoped. The bandit captain's laughter was hearty and false. Marcus put his hand on the pommel of his sword and tried to think of a way out of this that left the fewest people dead. If the actors charged the bowmen at the sides of the 'van, they might spook them into running. Leaving only four men on horse for him. Yardem appeared at his side, silent as a shadow. The Tralgu's bow was in his hand. So two horesmen each. Unless there were more in the trees.

"The day you mutiny and take the company?" Marcus murmured.

"Not today, sir."

The caravan master was shouting now, and the false knight's face was taking the green-bronze cast that spoke of rage among the Jasuru. Marcus slipped off the wagon and walked forward. The men on horse didn't seem to notice him until he was almost even with the 'van master's mare.

"How much do you want?" Marcus said.

Timzinae and Jasuru both shifted to stare down at him with equal anger.

"Pardon my interrupting your fine and spirited debate, but how much do you want?"

"You should show me some respect, boy," the Jasuru said.

"How much do you want, *my lord,*" Marcus said. "Because if you'll look at the 'van here, we don't have much. Unless his lordship and his lordship's noble compatriots are willing to accept tribute in tin ore and iron, there may not be a great deal we can offer."

"Don't speak for me," the Timzinae hissed.

“Don’t get us killed,” Marcus said, equally softly.

“And who are you, Firstblood?” the Jasuru said.

“Marcus Wester. I’m guard captain of this ’van.”

The laughter this time was less forced, and the men on the other horses joined in. The Jasuru shook his broad head and grinned. His tongue was black, and his teeth needle sharp.

“You’re Marcus Wester?”

“I am.”

“Ah. And I suppose that one back there is Lord Harton returned from the dead. Tell you what, I’ll be Drakis Stormcrow.”

“No less likely than Lord Knightly Whatever-it-was,” the ’van master said.

Marcus ignored him. “You’ve heard of me, then.”

“I was at Wodford, and I am about done being insulted,” the Jasuru said. “All your coin. All your food. Half your women. The rest of you can crawl back to Vanai.”

“Eat shit,” the ’van master said.

The Jasuru reached for his sword, and a new voice boomed out behind them.

“We. Shall. Pass.”

Master Kit stood on the top of the feed wagon. The black and purple robes of Orcus the Demon King draped from him like shadows made solid, and he held a staff with a skull on its end. When the actor spoke again, his voice carried to them all as if it came from the dim air.

“My protection is on these men. You cannot harm them.”

“What the sweet hell is this?” the Jasuru said, but his voice had taken a worried tone.

“You cannot harm us,” Master Kit said. “Your arrows will stray from us. Your swords will not break our skins. You have no power here.”

Marcus turned back to the Jasuru. Confusion and anxiety twisted the bandit’s face.

“This is shit,” one of the three behind him said, but his voice lacked conviction.

“Who is that?” the Jasuru said.

“My cunning man,” Marcus said.

“*Hear me,*” Master Kit shouted, and the forest itself seemed to go quiet. “The trees are our allies and the shadow of oak protects us. You cannot harm us, boy. And we *shall* pass.”

A chill ran up Marcus’s spine. He could see that Orcus the Demon King was having much the same effect on the bandits. He felt a small, tentative hope. The Jasuru pulled his bow from its sling and nocked a vicious-looking arrow.

“Say that again, you bastard!” the bandit captain shouted.

Even in the dimness, Marcus saw Master Kit smile. The actor raised

his arms, the dark folds of the costume seeming to twist on their own accord, just as they'd done during the play in Vanai. It was something to do with uneven stitching, but with Master Kit's sepulchral voice and defiant posture, the effect was unsettling. Master Kit spoke again, slow and clear and utterly confident.

"You cannot harm me. Your arrow will miss its mark."

The Jasuru scowled and drew back the string. The horn bow creaked.

Well, Marcus thought, *it was worth the try.* And then, a second later: *God damn. He* is *going to miss.*

The arrow sped through the gloom. Master Kit didn't flinch as the shaft flew past his ear. The Jasuru licked his lips with a wide, black tongue. His gaze shifted from Marcus to Master Kit and back. There was real fear in his eyes now.

"And for what it carries, I really *am* Marcus Wester."

The silence lasted four long breaths together, before the Jasuru turned his horse to the side and raised his arm. "There's nothing here, boys," the bandit shouted. "These little turds aren't worth the effort."

The horsemen sprang away into the forest. Marcus stood in the road, listening to their hoofbeats fade and realizing that he wasn't going to die today after all. He clasped his hands behind him to keep them from trembling and looked up at the 'van master. The Timzinae was shaking too. At least Marcus wasn't the only one. He stepped to the side of the road, leaning to see that the bowmen at the treeline had also vanished.

Yardem walked to him. "That was odd," the Tralgu said.

"Was," Marcus said. "Don't suppose we have a winch? We're going to have to move that tree."

That night, the 'van master's wife cooked meat. Not sausage, not salt pork, but a fresh-killed lamb the 'van master bought from a farm at the forest's edge. The meat was dark and rich, seasoned with raisins and a sharp-tasting yellow sauce. The carters and drivers and most of Marcus's guard sat around a roaring bonfire at the side of the road. All except the wool-hauler, Tag, who never seemed to eat with anybody. And sitting at a separate fire away from all the others, Marcus ate with Master Kit.

"It's how I've made my living since… well, not since before *you* were born, I suppose," the actor said. "I stand before people, usually on a wagon, and I convince them of things. I tell them that I am a fallen king or a shipwrecked sailor on an unknown shore. I presume they know it isn't truth, but I see my work as making them believe even when they know better."

“What you did back there, then?” Marcus said. “Talking the bastard with the bow out of his confidence? It wasn’t magic?”

“I think talking a man into believing in his own failure is close enough to magic. Don’t you?”

“I don’t really, no.”

“Well, then perhaps we disagree on the point. More wine?”

Marcus took the proffered skin and squirted the bright-tasting wine into his mouth. In the light of the two fires—the small one at their knees, the large one fifteen yards away—shadows clung to the old actor’s cheeks and in the hollows of his eyes.

“Captain. If it’s any comfort to you, I’ll swear this. I can be very convincing, and I can tell when someone is trying to convince me. That is all the magic I possess.”

“Cut thumbs on it?” Marcus said, and Master Kit laughed.

“I’d rather not. If I get blood on the costumes, it’s hard to get out. But what about you? What exactly did *you* intend, facing the man down like that?”

Marcus shrugged.

“I didn’t intend anything. Not in particular,” he said. “Only I thought the ’van master was going about it badly.”

“Would you have fought?” Master Kit asked. “If it had come to swords and arrows?”

“Of course,” Marcus said. “Probably not for very long, given the odds, but I’d have fought. Yardem too, and I hope your people along with us. It’s what they pay us for.”

“Even though you knew we couldn’t win?”

“Yes.”

Master Kit nodded. Marcus thought a smile was lurking at the corners of the actor’s lips, but in the flickering light he couldn’t be sure. It might have been something else.

“I want to start drilling your people,” Marcus said. “An hour before we ride in the morning, and an hour after we stop. We can’t do much, but they ought to know more about a sword than which end to hold it by.”

“I think that’s wise,” Master Kit said.

Marcus looked up at the sky. The stars glowed like snowfall, and the moon, newly risen, sent long, pale shadows across black ground. The forest was behind them, but the air still smelled like weather. Rain, Marcus decided. Most likely it would be rain. Master Kit was chewing his lamb, his eyes on the little fire and his expression distant.

“Don’t worry. Today was the worst of it,” Marcus said. “We’ve got our excitement behind us.”

Master Kit didn’t look at him, making his polite smile to the flames instead. For a moment, Marcus thought the old man wasn’t going to

speak. When he did, his voice was low and abstracted.

"Probably," Master Kit said.

Geder

Geder had imagined Vanai would be more like Camnipol or Estinport: a great city of stone and jade. The close-built wooden structures and wide canals felt both smaller than he'd expected and larger. Even the Grand Square of the conquered city was small compared to the wide commons of Camnipol, and the richest sections of Vanai were as thick with humanity as the better slums at home. Camnipol was a city. Vanai was a child's scrapwood playhouse that had spread. It was beautiful in its way, strange and foreign and improbable. He wasn't sure yet whether he liked it.

He limped down the rain-darkened streets of occupied Vanai, leaning on the blackwood-and-silver walking stick with every step. Lord Ternigan's address was to begin soon, and while his wound would forgive his absence, Geder had missed too much already. The prospect of going home to regale his father with stories of how he'd collapsed in the battle and spent the two-day sack with a cunning man tending his leg was bad enough.

The canal on the eastern edge of the modest Grand Square was choked with fallen leaves, gold and red and yellow remaking the surface of the dark water. As Geder watched, a turtle rose from below, its black head sticking out of the water. A single bright red leaf adhered to its shell. The turtle made its stately way past what looked at first like a log, but was in fact a corpse wearing the drenched colors of the former prince: a soldier of Vanai hauled in a cart from the battlefield and dropped in the canal as a message to the locals. Other bodies hung from the trees in the parks and along the colonnades. They lay on the stairs of the palaces and the markets and the square of the public gaol where the former prince now ate and shat and shivered before his subjects. The smell of rotting flesh was only kept in check by the cool weather.

Once the prince entered exile, the dead would be gathered up and burned. They had been men once. Now they were political sculpture.

"Palliako!"

Geder looked up. From halfway across the Grand Square, Jorey Kalliam scowled and waved him on. Geder turned away from turtle and corpse, limping manfully across the pavement. The nobles of Antea stood in martial array, waiting only for the few stragglers like himself. Before them, on the bare ground, sat what high officials of the city had been spared. Timzinae merchants and guildsmen,

Firstblood artisans and pragmatic noblemen. They wore their own clothing—much of it with a notably imperial cut—and held themselves more like the polite attendees of a religious function than the debased and the conquered. Sodai Carvenallin, the secretary to Lord Ternigan, stood alone on the stone platform they all faced and looked forward with folded arms. Geder hadn't seen the man to speak to since the night they'd gotten drunk together. The night Klin had burned his book. Geder shook the memory away and took his place.

He tried not to notice the new finery around him, but it was impossible. Sir Gospey Allintot's cloak was closed with a broach of worked silver and brilliant ruby. Sozlu Veren had his sword sheathed in a scabbard of dragon's jade and yellowed ivory that could have been made a thousand years before. A chain of gold looped around Jorey Kalliam's neck that looked to be more than a month's rent from all the holdings of Rivenhalm. Their clothes were freshly laundered, their boots shone even in the grey overcast light. The warrior aristocrats of Antea wore their conquest proudly. Geder looked down at his little walking stick. It was the nearest thing he had to spoils of war, and he tried to be proud of it.

"Quite a day," Geder said, nodding toward the low grey clouds. "It was snowing for a bit this morning. Glad we aren't marching in this. Though I suppose we will be soon, eh? Taking tribute to the king."

Jorey Kalliam made a low, affirming sound in his throat but didn't meet Geder's eyes.

"My leg's doing well. All laudable pus," Geder said. "But you heard about Count Hiren? Cut to the arm went septic. He died last night when they tried to amputate. Damn shame. He was a good man."

"He was," Jorey agreed.

Geder tried to follow the man's gaze, but Jorey seemed focused on nothing. Or, no. His eyes moved restlessly, searching for something. Geder searched too, uncertain what he was looking for.

"Something wrong?" Geder asked, his voice low.

"Klin's not here."

Geder looked through the crowd, his attention more focused now. There were gaps in the form, men killed or injured or called away on the Lord Marshal's business. Kalliam was correct. Sir Alan Klin should have stood at the head of the group, the men under his command arrayed behind him. Instead, Sir Gospey Allintot had the place, his chin held high.

"Ill, maybe?" Geder said. Jorey chuckled as if it had been a joke.

The drums announced the Lord Marshal. The collected nobility of Antea lifted their hands in salute, and Lord Ternigan let them remain there for a moment before he returned the gesture. Between them, the powerful men of Vanai accepted their ritual humiliation with polite

silence. Jorey grunted, his expression sour. He wasn't searching any longer. Geder followed his gaze, and found Klin standing at the rear of the platform beside the Lord Marshal's secretary. Klin wore a silk tunic and hose of somber red and a black-dyed woolen cloak. The cut spoke less of blades and battle than governance.

Geder felt his belly drop. "Are we staying here?" he asked quietly. Jorey Kalliam didn't answer.

"Lords of Antea," Ternigan said, his voice echoing through the square not quite so loudly as it might have. The Lord Marshal appeared to be coming down with a cold. "I thank you all in the name of King Simeon. Through your valor, the empire has been made again secure. It is my decision that we return now to Camnipol with the tribute which Vanai owes the throne. It's late in the season, and the march is a long one, I'd rather we didn't spend all week getting our boots on. I have asked Sir Alan Klin to remain as Protector of Vanai until such time as King Simeon names a permanent governor. All of you who followed him in battle will follow him in this as well."

His orders given, Ternigan nodded to himself and turned his attention to the men seated on the pavement. As he retold the history of Antean claims upon Vanai, justified the occupation in terms of wars and agreements made six hundred years before between dynastic lines and independent parliaments long since dissolved, Geder's mind stumbled through what had just happened to him.

There would be no return to Camnipol for him, not this season. Possibly not for years. He looked around at the close-built wooden buildings with their steep-pitched roofs crowding the narrow streets, the grand canal where barges and boats made their way through the city and back out to the river, the low grey sky. This wasn't an exotic adventure any longer. This was where he would live. A thousand half-formed plans for his return to Camnipol, to Rivenhalm, to his father's hearth fell apart before him.

Ternigan stepped back from the platform's edge, took a sealed letter from his secretary, and presented it to Alan Klin, Protector of Vanai. Klin stepped forward, opened the letter, and read his charge from the Lord Marshal aloud. Geder shook his head. The despair that grew with every phrase showed him how deeply he'd been anticipating the campaign's end and his freedom from Alan Klin.

The ache in Geder's leg throbbed as Klin assured the men of Vanai that he would treat all races with equanimity, that loyalty to Antea would be rewarded and treachery punished swiftly and terribly. The glory of King Simeon in particular and Antea in the large took up the better part of an hour. Even the others in Geder's cohort were growing restless by the end. Then Klin thanked the Lord Marshal for his service and formally accepted this new charge. His salute was met with a

rousing cheer, the men pleased as much that the ceremony had ended as with anything Klin had said. The citizens of Vanai rose to their feet, shaking limbs gone numb and talking among themselves like merchants at a fresh market.

Geder saw mixed reactions among the men of the empire. Some envied Klin and his men their new role. Sir Gospey Allintot was grinning so widely, he seemed to glow. Jorey Kalliam walked away with a thoughtful expression, and Geder struggled to keep up with him.

"We're exiled," Geder said when they were away from the greater mass of their companions. "We won the battle, and in return they exiled us just as sure as the damned prince of the city."

Jorey looked at him with annoyance and pity. "Klin's been aiming for this from the start," he said. "This was always what he hoped for."

"Why?" Geder asked.

"There's power in being the king's voice," Jorey said. "Even in Vanai. And if Klin makes himself useful, when the time comes to trade the city away again, he'll have a place at that table as well. Excuse me. I have to write to my father."

"Yes," Geder said. "I should tell my family too. I don't know what I'll say."

Jorey's laughter was low and bitter.

"Tell them you didn't miss the sack after all."

If there was any question of who among Alan Klin's men were favored, it was answered when Lord Ternigan left the gates of the city. Klin's new secretary, the son of an important Timzinae merchant, took Geder from his bed in the infirmary to his new home: three small rooms in a minor palace that had been storage and still smelled of rat piss. Still, there was a small hearth, and the winds didn't blow through the walls the way they had in his tent.

Each day brought Geder a new order from Lord Klin. A channel gate that was to be locked and disabled, a marketplace in which each of the merchants was to pay for an Antean permit to continue their businesses, a loyalist of the deposed prince to be taken to the jail cells as an example to others. It might be common soldiers who announced the demands and enforced their execution, but a nobleman's presence was required; a face to show that the aristocracy of Antea was present and involved with the business of its new city. And given the tasks assigned him, Geder suspected that he'd be the most hated man in Vanai before the winter passed.

Closing a popular brothel? Geder led the force. Turning the widow and children of a loyalist out of their hovel? Geder. Arresting a

prominent member of the local merchant class?

"May I ask the charge?" said Magister Imaniel of the Medean bank in Vanai.

"I'm sorry," Geder said. "I'm ordered to bring you before the Lord Protector, willing or no."

"Ordered," the small man said sourly. "And parading me through the street in chains?"

"Part of my instructions. I'm sorry."

The house of the Medean bank in Vanai was in a side street, and little larger than a well-to-do family's home. Even so, it seemed somehow bare. Only the small, sun-worn magister and a single well-fed woman wringing her hands in the doorway. Magister Imaniel rose from the table, considered the soldiers standing behind Geder, and then adjusted his tunic.

"I don't imagine you know when I'll be able to return to my work," he said.

"I'm not told," Geder said.

"You can't do this," the woman said. "We've done nothing against you."

"Cam," the banker said sharply. "Don't. This is only business, I'm sure. Tell anyone that asks there's been a mistake, and I'm speaking with the very noble Lord Protector to correct it."

The woman—Cam—bit her lips and looked away. Magister Imaniel walked quietly to stand before Geder and bowed.

"I don't suppose we can overlook the chains?" he asked. "My work depends to a great wise on reputation, and…"

"I'm very sorry," Geder said, "but Lord Klin gave—"

"Orders," the banker said. "I understand. Let's be done with this, then."

A crowd had gathered on the street, word of Geder's appearance at the house traveling, it seemed, faster than the birds could fly. Geder walked in the middle of his guardsmen, the prisoner in his clinking iron just behind him. When he looked back, the man's leathery face was a mask of amusement and indulgence. Geder couldn't say if the man's fearlessness was an act or genuine. All along their route past the canals and down the streets, faces turned to see the banker in chains. Geder marched, his walking stick tapping resolutely against the streets. He kept his expression sober, to hide the fact that he didn't know why he was doing the things he did. He had no doubt that by morning the whole city would know he had taken the man in. That it was clearly Klin's intention didn't reassure him.

Sir Alan Klin met them in the wide chamber that had once been the prince's audience hall. All signs of the former government were gone or else covered over by the Antean banners of King Simeon and House

Klin. The air smelled of smoke, rain, and wet dogs. Sir Alan rose, smiling, from his table.

"Magister Imaniel of the Medean bank?"

"The same, Lord Protector," the banker said with a smile and a bow. His voice was amiable. Geder might almost have thought Klin hadn't just humiliated the man in front of the city. "It appears I may have given your lordship some offense. I must, of course, apologize. If I might know the nature of my trespass, I will, of course, guard against it in the future."

Klin waved a hand casually.

"Not at all, sir," he said. "Only I spoke with your former prince before he left in exile. He said that you had refused to fund his campaign."

"It seemed unlikely that he would repay the debt," Magister Imaniel said.

"I understand," Klin said.

Geder looked from one to the other. The tone of the conversation was so calm, so nearly collegial, it confused him. And yet there was a hardness in Klin's eyes that—along with the chains still around the banker's wrists and ankles—made everything he said a threat. Klin walked slowly back to the table where the remains of his midday meal were still sitting on a silver plate.

"I have been looking over the reports of the sack," Klin said. "I saw that the tribute to King Simeon taken from your establishment… Well, it seems surprisingly light."

"My former prince may have an exaggerated opinion of my resources," Magister Imaniel said.

Klin smiled. "Is it buried, or have you smuggled it out?"

"I don't know what you mean, my lord," Magister Imaniel said.

"You wouldn't object to my factor auditing your books, then?"

"Of course not. We are pleased that Antea has taken the authority that rightly belonged to it, and look forward to doing business in a more friendly and ordered city."

"And access to your house?"

"Of course."

Klin nodded. "You understand that I will have to hold you until I find the truth of all this? Whatever money your bank holds here is now subject to Antean review."

"I expected as much," Magister Imaniel said, "but I trust you won't take offense that I had hoped for better."

"It's a fallen world. We do what we must," Klin said, and then to the captain of the guard at Geder's left, "Take him to the public gaol. Put him on the lower level, where everyone can see him. If anyone tries to talk with him, take note of what they say and detain them."

Geder watched as the small man was led away. He wasn't sure whether he was intended to follow along or not. But Klin wasn't glaring at him, so perhaps he'd been meant to stay after all.

"Did you follow that, Palliako?" Klin asked when the banker and guards had gone.

"The bank had less money than expected?" Geder said.

Klin laughed in a way that left Geder unsure whether he was being mocked.

"Oh, it's there," he said. "Somewhere. And from what the prince said, there was quite a bit of it. Enough to pay the mercenary forces to outlast a siege. Enough to buy the Maccian forces twice over. Maybe more than that."

"But he kept it from his prince," Geder said.

"Not out of loyalty to us," Klin said. "Bankers answer to no throne. But if they drowned the money, someone will have helped cart it to a canal. If it's buried, someone held the spade. If it's smuggled, someone arranged it. And when that person sees the head of the bank in gaol, they may panic and try to buy their way free."

"Ah," Geder said.

"You're the man associated with the arrest, so you'll need to be available these next few days," Klin said. "Approachable. And whatever you hear, you bring to me."

"Of course, sir."

"Excellent," Klin said. The silence between them stretched, and Geder realized that he'd been dismissed.

He walked back out to the square, found a stone bench under a black-barked tree almost bare of its leaves, and sat. His leg ached, but there was no coolness on his thigh where fresh blood or pus had leaked. Across the street, a group of youths—Firstblood and Timzinae mixing together as if the races were at perfect ease—pretended not to watch him. A flock of crows conversed among themselves in the branches of the trees and then rose like winged smoke into the air. Geder tapped his walking stick against the pavement, the little shock against his fingers oddly reassuring.

For the next few days, he was bait on a hook. He understood that. Perhaps the banker's conspirators would take the chance to buy themselves the good opinion of Antea. Or perhaps they'd stay quiet. Or, quite possibly, they'd arrange an accident for the man most associated with the problem. Klin had put him in danger without so much as making the threat he was under explicit.

And still, it was a handful of days that Geder could make his way through the streets and markets and call it Klin's order. His squire had brought him rumor of a bookseller in the southern quarter. He could make his way there at last. And if he had to go armed and under

guard, at least he could go.

For two days Geder wandered the streets and cafés and beer halls of Vanai, but carefully. In church, with the voices of the choir spiraling in the wide air above him, he was still careful not to let anyone sit too near him in the pew. At the fresh market, he picked through the half-rotten volumes in a bookseller's cart, but with a soldier at his back. Then on the third day, a carter named Olfreed came to his rooms with talk of a caravan organized by a well-known ally of the Medean bank called Master Will.

For the first time, Geder heard the name Marcus Wester.

Cithrin

Distracted by the rigors of her disguise and the wealth hidden in her cart, Cithrin had not been careful.

"What were you *thinking,* boy?" the caravan master demanded. Cithrin looked at his feet, her cheeks burning and her throat thick with shame. The red dust of the caravanserai's yard caked their boots, and fallen leaves rimed with frost littered the ground.

"I'm sorry," she said, the cold turning her words white.

"They're mules," the caravan master said. "They need caring for. How long has this been going on?"

"A few days," she said, her lips hardly moving.

"Speak up, boy! How long?"

"A few days," she said.

A pause.

"All right. The feed cart can get by with three on the team. You tie the sick one to a tree out there, and I'll bring you one to take its place."

"But if we leave him, he'll die," Cithrin said.

"That's the thought, yes."

"But it's not his fault. You can't just leave him to die all by himself."

"All right. I'll bring you a knife, and you can bleed him out."

Cithrin's outraged silence was eloquence enough. The caravan master's clear interior eyelids slid closed and open again, blinking without looking away from her.

"If you'd rather drop out of the 'van, you're welcome," he said. "We're going too slow already. I'm not going to stop everything because you can't keep your team. You let me know what you decide."

"I won't leave him," she said, surprised by her own words. Horrified that she meant them. She couldn't drop out of the 'van.

"He's a *mule.*"

"I won't leave him." The words felt better that time.

"Then you're an idiot."

The caravan master turned, spat, and walked away. Cithrin watched him as he stalked back to the stone walls and thin-thatched roof of the shelter. When it became clear he wasn't coming back, she went back to the stable. The larger of her mules stood in his stall, his head lowered. His breath was thick and ragged. Cithrin stepped in beside him, her hand stroking his thick, wiry coat. The mule raised his head, flicked an ear, and sagged down again.

She tried to picture herself tying the animal to a tree and leaving him there for sickness and snow to kill. She tried to imagine slitting his warm, fuzzy throat. How would she get the money to Carse now?

"I'm sorry," Cithrin said. "I'm not really a carter. I didn't know."

She'd thought at first that the slowness of her cart was her own fault, that the gap that opened in the afternoons between her and the cart before hers meant she wasn't pushing the team when she should, or that some fine point of negotiating turns was beyond her. It was only when the larger mule had coughed—a wet, phlegmy sound—that she realized he was ill. Magister Imaniel had kept a religious household, but Cithrin prayed that the animal would recover on his own.

He hadn't.

The caravanserai—a ruin barely maintained by those who passed through it—was on the side of a wide, sloping hill, the first foothill of the high, snow-peaked mountain range that marked the end of the Free Cities and the beginning of Birancour. Even now, distance-blued peaks rose from the horizon. The pass through them marked the shortest path between Vanai and Carse.

Carse. The word itself had taken on almost religious significance for her. Carse, the great city of Northcoast overlooking the peaceful sea. The home of white towers above chalk cliffs, of the Council of Eventide, of the Grave of Dragons. The seat of the Medean bank, and the end of her career as a smuggler and refugee. She had never been there, but her longing for it was like wanting to go home.

She could go alone. She'd have to. Only she didn't know the way. Or how to nurse a sick mule back to health. Or what she'd do if another bandit crew stepped out of the forest. The mule heaved in a huge breath and then coughed: deep, wet, and rasping. Cithrin stepped forward and rubbed his wide, soft ears.

"We can find a way," she said as much to herself as the animal. "It'll be all right."

"Probably, it will," a man's voice said.

The cunning man, Master Kit, stood at the stable door, the woman called Opal at his side. Cithrin moved half a step in toward her mule, her arm around its sloping neck as if to protect it. Or be protected by it. An anxious thrill quickened her breath.

"This is the poor thing, then?" Opal said, pushing past the cunning man. "Tired-looking, ain't he?"

Cithrin nodded, looking down to avoid their eyes. Opal slipped into the stall, walked around the mule once, pausing to press her ear to the beast's side. Then, singing a low song in words Cithrin didn't recognize, she knelt before its head and gently pried open its lips.

"Opal takes care of our team, when we have one," Master Kit said.

“I’ve come to put my trust in her when it comes to things with hooves.”

Cithrin nodded, torn between a rush of gratitude and discomfort at being so close to the guardsmen. Opal rose and sniffed carefully at the mule’s ears.

“Tag, is it?” she said, and Cithrin nodded. “Well, Tag, can you tell me if the old boy was listing to one side? Did you have to correct him?”

Cithrin tried to remember, then shook her head no.

“That’s something,” Opal said, and then over her shoulder to Master Kit, “I don’t think it’s in his ears, so that’s for the best. He’s wheezing, but he doesn’t have water in his lungs. At a guess, keep him warm a couple of days, he’ll stand true as sticks. Needs more blankets, though.”

“Two days,” Master Kit said. “I would be surprised if Captain Wester were comfortable with that.”

The mule’s labored breath and the murmur of the morning breeze through the boughs roughened the silence. Cithrin felt the knot in her belly tightening into something like nausea.

“One fewer guard won’t make any damn difference,” Opal said. “I’ll stay with Tag, and when the old boy’s well enough, we’ll catch you up. Won’t be more than a day or two, and one cart with a good team moves faster than a full ’van.”

The cunning man crossed his arms, considering. Cithrin felt a rush of hope.

“Can you do that?” Master Kit asked her. His eyes were gentle, his voice as soft as old flannel.

“I can, sir,” Cithrin said, keeping her voice low and masculine. The cunning man nodded.

“I don’t suppose there’s any harm in suggesting it,” he said. “But perhaps you would allow *me* to approach them, Tag?”

She nodded, and the old man smiled. He turned and walked back toward the quarters, leaving Cithrin, Opal, and the animals to themselves.

The relief took the edge off her fear. And perhaps it wasn’t such a bad thing, in its way. With Opal dressing in her leathers and Cithrin disguised as a man, they weren’t likely to arouse suspicion. It would be a few days away from the greater company, so she would only have to avoid discovery by Opal. And their supposedly different sexes would give a plausible excuse for privacy.

And yet the fear didn’t entirely fade. It came, she told herself, from knowing more than the people around her. She could almost hear Magister Imaniel now, sitting at the evening meal with Cam and Besel, dissecting exactly how a merchant or prelate had behaved differently

than expected, and what it implied that they had. Cithrin knew that Tag the Carter carried enough wealth to buy a small army, but no one else did. The risk of lagging behind the body of the 'van was no more than she would have faced if she'd truly carried a load of undyed wool. Her chances only seemed worse because she knew the stakes of the bet were high. She was undiscovered. No one was searching for her or what she carried, the mule would be made well, and she wouldn't face a journey to Carse by herself. Everything would be fine.

"First time out?" Opal said.

Cithrin glanced at her and nodded.

"Well, don't let it worry you, dear," the guard said. "We take care of our own."

It didn't occur to Cithrin for hours to wonder exactly why a mercenary guard would include a semi-competent carter in *our own,* and by then the plan was set and the caravan with Captain Wester and Master Kit was gone down the road to the mountains and to Carse.

They passed the day in caring for the sick beast: warming the stable, rubbing down the mule, forcing an odd concoction that smelled of tar and licorice into its mouth. By nightfall, the mule held its head higher and its cough seemed less violent. That night, Cithrin and Opal slept in the stables, wrapped in thin blankets. An ancient iron brazier between them threw off enough heat to keep the room from freezing, but only just. In the darkness outside, something shrieked once and then not again. Cithrin closed her eyes, resting her head on one arm, and willed herself to sleep. She envied Opal's slow, even breath. Her own body tensed and shivered, her mind jumped from one fear to another, conjuring a hundred possible disasters. The bandits who had attacked the 'van before might arrive in the night, rape and murder them both, and make off with the bank's money. Opal might discover her secret and, mad with avarice, slit her throat. The mule might relapse and leave her stranded in the autumn cold.

When a low, grey dawn finally came, Cithrin hadn't slept. Her head ached, and her back felt as if someone had beaten her with a hammer. Opal, humming to herself, rebuilt the fire, boiled a pan of water with a sprinkling of leaves in it, and checked on their patient. When Cithrin joined her, the mule felt cooler to the touch, his eyes looked brighter, his head stood at its more usual angle. In the next stall, the other mule cleared her throat and grumbled.

"Is she getting sick too?" Cithrin asked. The very idea made her want to weep.

"She may, but she hasn't yet," Opal said. "Probably just jealous that the old boy here's getting all the attention."

"Should we go, then? I mean, is it safe to get back to the 'van?"

"This afternoon, maybe," Opal said. "Better that he have his

strength back. Start him with a half day's work."

"But—"

"We've been this way before. We'll catch them up before they go over the pass. They'll stop at Bellin, send up scouts."

Cithrin knew the name, but she couldn't place it. Opal glanced over at her.

"Bellin," Opal said. "Trading town just before the pass. You really don't know much about hauling in a caravan, do you?"

"No," Cithrin said, both sullen and embarrassed at being sullen.

"Bellin's not much, but they're friendly to travelers. Master Kit took us there for a month once. New people coming through the road every few days, no one staying long. It was like being a traveling company without the traveling."

A breath of cold wind stirred the straw. In the brazier, the coals brightened and the thin flame danced. Cithrin's mind felt slow and sodden with fatigue. What would a guard company do with a month of passing traders and merchants and missionaries? Protect them inside the town walls where they needed it the least?

"I should go," Cithrin said. "Check the… check the cart."

"Make sure it hasn't gone anywhere," Opal said, as if she was agreeing.

In practice, being only with Opal was better than being with the full 'van. With just one person to keep track of, Cithrin could find moments to let her guard down, be herself instead of Tag. When the time came and they harnessed the mules, it wasn't all that different from being alone. Opal did most of the talking, and that was for the most part about how to manage the team. Cithrin knew that Tag should have been bored by the lectures, but she drank them in. In the first half day, she learned a hundred things she'd been doing wrong. When they bedded down that night in a wide meadow beside the road, she was a better carter than she'd been in all the long weeks since Vanai.

She wanted to thank the guard for all she'd done, but she was afraid that if she started she might not stop. Gratitude would become friendship, and friendship confession, and then her secrets would be spilled. So instead she made sure that Opal got the best food and the softer place to sleep.

In the darkness, the two of them lay on the soft wool. The moon and stars were gone, wrapped in clouds, and the darkness was absolute. Cithrin's mind skittered and shifted, thin with exhaustion. And still, sleep was slow to come. In the middle of the night, she felt Opal's body pressing next to her own and woke up in a panic, afraid that the guard was attacking her or seducing her or both, but she was only cold and half asleep. She spent the rest of the night drawn by the

warmth of Opal's body and trying to hold herself apart for fear of compromising her disguise.

In the dark, the weeks between her and Carse seemed eternal. She imagined that she could feel the casks and boxes hidden just beneath her. The books and ledgers, silk and tobacco leaf and spice. Gems and jewelry. The weight of responsibility and fear was like someone pressing on her chest. When, just before dawn, she finally slept deeply enough to dream, she found herself at the edge of a cliff, trying to keep a hundred stumbling babies from pitching into the abyss.

She woke with a cry, and she woke to snow.

Wide, fat flakes dropped from the sky, grey against the white of clouds. The trees caught it, the bark seeming to turn black by contrast. The dragon's jade of the road was gone, their path marked only by a clear space between the trunks. The horizon had been erased. Opal was already fixing the mules in their harness.

"Can we really go in this?" Cithrin asked, forgetting to deepen her voice.

"Better had. Unless you'd prefer to settle here."

"It's safe, though?"

"Safer than the option," Opal said. "Help me with this buckle. My hand's half frozen."

Cithrin clambered down from the cart and did as she was told. Before long, they were forging ahead. The wide iron cartwheels became caked with wet snow and the mules began to steam. Without discussion, Opal had taken the reins and the whip. Cithrin huddled beside her, miserable. Opal squinted into the weather and shook her head.

"The good news is there won't be bandits."

"Really? And what's the bad?" Cithrin said bitterly.

Opal looked over at her, eyes wide with surprise and delight. Cithrin realized it was the closest thing to a joke she'd made since the caravan left Vanai. She blushed, and the guard beside her laughed.

Bellin had only half a dozen buildings. The rest of the town crouched inside a wide cliff, doorways and windows carved into the grey stone thousands of years before by inhuman hands. Soot stained the wall where chimneys slanted out into the world. Snow clung to huge runes carved into the mountainside, a script Cithrin had never seen before. The peaks themselves were invisible apart from a sense of looming darkness within the storm. The familiar carts of the 'van were black dots against the white, horses and carters already sheltered within the rock. She helped Opal set their cart in place, unhitch the mules, and guide them safely into the stable where the 'van's other animals were

already tucked away.

The guards were there, sitting around a banked smith's furnace, Mikel and Hornet, Master Kit and Smit. Sandr grinned at them both as they came in, and the Tralgu second in command lifted a wide hand without turning from his conversation with the long-haired woman, Cary. Opal's pleasure at seeing them almost made Cithrin happy too.

"There must be something," Cary said, and Cithrin could tell it wasn't the first time she'd said it.

"There's not," Yardem rumbled. "Women are smaller and weaker. There's no weapon that can make that an advantage."

"What are we talking about?" Opal asked, sitting by the open furnace. Cithrin sat on the bench at her side, only realizing afterward that it was the same position they'd held on the cart. Master Kit chuckled and shook his head.

"I think Cary would prefer to train with weapons that better exploit her natural abilities," Master Kit said.

"Like being small and weak," Sandr said. Without looking over, Cary flicked a clod of earth at his head.

"Short bow," Cary said.

"Takes power to pull back a bow," Yardem said. He seemed on the edge of apology. "With a sling and stone, it matters less, but it still matters. A spear has better reach, but takes more muscle. A blade needs less strength, but calls for more reach. A strong, big woman's better than a small, weak man, but there's no such thing as a woman's natural weapon." The Tralgu shrugged expansively.

"There has to be *something,*" Cary said.

"There doesn't," Yardem said.

"Sex," Sandr suggested with a grin. Cary threw another clod at his head.

"How are your mules, Tag?" Master Kit asked.

"Better," Cithrin said. "Much better. Thanks to Opal."

"It was nothing," Opal said.

"I'm pleased it worked out," Master Kit said. "I was beginning to worry that we'd leave you behind."

"Wouldn't have happened," a voice said from behind them.

Cithrin twisted in her seat, and her chest went tight with anxiety. Captain Wester stalked into the room. Snow caked his wide leather cloak and matted his hair. His face was so bright, it looked like the cold had slapped him. He walked to the heat, scowling.

"Welcome back, sir," the Tralgu said. The captain didn't so much as nod.

"I take it the scouting went poorly, then," Master Kit said.

"No worse than expected," Marcus Wester said. "The 'van master's breaking it to the others right now. There's no getting through that

pass. Not now, not for months."

"*What?*" Cithrin said, her voice sharp and unexpected. She tried to swallow the word as soon as she'd said it, but the captain took no particular notice of her.

"Snow came early, we took too long, and we didn't get lucky," he said. "We'll get some warehouse space for the goods and bunks for the rest of us. Not much room, so it'll be close quarters. We'll make for Carse in the spring."

Spring. The word hit Cithrin in the gut. She looked at the flames dancing in the furnace, felt a trickle of snowmelt tracing its way down her spine. Despairing laughter bubbled at the back of her throat. If she let it out, it would turn to tears, and it wouldn't stop. A season spent in disguise. Moving everything in her cart to a warehouse and back without being discovered. Months to Carse instead of weeks.

I can't do this, she thought.

Marcus

Nightfall came early. Only half of the carts had been emptied, and the caravan master was all but chewing his own wrists over it. Marcus didn't think it would be a problem. The storm had come from the west, and the mountains would squeeze the worst of the snow out. They might be tunneling up from the roofs in Birancour, but Bellin was in the rain shadow. They'd be fine. At least when it came to snow.

Yardem had arranged a separate barracks for the so-called guards. Two small rooms with a shared fire grate, but in the town proper, tucked snugly in the living rock. Carved swirls and whorls caught the firelight, and the walls seemed to breathe and dance. Marcus pulled off the soaked leather of his boots and leaned back, groaning. The others were about him, lounging and talking and negotiating for the best sleeping spaces. The ease the actors took in close company wasn't all that different from real sword-and-bows, and the jokes were better. Even Yardem seemed half relaxed, and that wasn't a common thing.

Still, Marcus's work wasn't done.

"Meeting," he said. "Our job's changed now. Best that we talk that through, not find ourselves surprised later."

The chatter stilled. Master Kit sat beside the fire, his wiry grey hair standing like smoke gone still.

"I don't see how the 'van can afford this," the actor said. "Even with small quarters, it's going to cost having us kept and fed for a full season."

"Likely they'll lose money," Marcus said. "But that's the caravan master's problem, not ours. We aren't here to see a profit turned. Just everyone kept safe. On the road, that means bandits. Holed up for a winter, that means no one gets stir crazy or starts sleeping with someone, makes someone else jealous, or gets in mind to cheat too much at cards."

Smit, the jack-of-all-roles, pulled a long face. "Are we playing guards or nursemaids?" the man said.

"We're doing whatever gets the 'van to Carse safe," Marcus said. "We'll protect them from ourselves if we have to."

"Mmm. Good line," Cary, the thin woman, said. *"Protect them from ourselves if we have to."*

Marcus narrowed his eyes, frowning.

"They're writing a new play," Master Kit said. "A comic piece about an acting troupe hired to pretend they're caravan guards."

Yardem grunted and flicked an ear. Maybe annoyance, maybe amusement. Likely both. Marcus chose to ignore it.

"We've got a dozen and a half carters," Marcus said. "Add the 'van master and his wife. You've traveled with these people for weeks. You've watched them. You know them. What problems are we going to have?"

"The man hauling the tin ore," Smit said. "He's been spoiling for a fight since those raiders. He's not going to last a season without one unless someone starts sharing his bed or puts him down hard."

"I'd thought the same," Marcus said, allowing himself a moment's pleasure. The actors were much more perceptive than his usual men. Given the circumstances, that would help. "What else?"

"The quarter-Dartinae," Opal, the older leading woman, said. "He's been avoiding the 'van master's sermons almost as much as you have, Captain. A constant diet of scripture isn't going to sit well with him."

"The girl in the false whiskers," Mikel, the thin boy, said. "She's looking mightily fragile."

"Oh, yes. *Her,*" Cary said.

"And God knows what she's really hauling," Opal said, her tone all agreement. "Gets jumpy as a cat whenever anyone gets too near her cart. Won't talk about it either."

Marcus raised a hand, commanding silence.

"*Who?*" he said.

"The girl in the false whiskers," Master Kit said. "The one that calls herself Tag."

Marcus looked at Yardem. The Tralgu's expression mirrored his own blank surprise. Marcus lifted an eyebrow. *Did you know?* Yardem shook his head once, earrings jingling. *No.*

And God knows what she's really hauling.

"With me, Yardem," Marcus said, pulling his boots back on.

"Yes, sir," the Tralgu rumbled.

The carters and and 'van master were in a separate network of rooms and tunnels. Marcus went through the smoke-hazed halls and common rooms, Yardem looming at his side. The other guards or actors, or whatever they were, trailed along behind like children playing follow-me-follow-you. With every room that Tag wasn't in, Marcus felt the hair on the back of his neck rising. His mind ran back over everything that had happened on the road, every time he'd spoken to the boy, everything that the 'van master had said about him. There was very little. Almost nothing. Always, the boy had kept himself—and, more the point, his cart—to himself.

The last of the rented rooms looked out over the dark and snow-carpeted hills. Behind him, Marcus heard the high, excited voices of the carters asking what was happening. The chill, wet air smelled as

much of rain as snow. Lightning sketched the horizon.

"He's not here, sir."

"I see that."

"She can't have gone," Opal said from behind them. "Girl hardly knew how to steer the cart without something in front for the mules to follow."

"The cart," Marcus said, walking out into the gloom.

The carts that hadn't been unloaded were near the low stone warehouses. Half a foot of snow covered them, making them all seem taller than they truly were. Marcus stalked among them. Behind him, someone lit torches, the fires hissing in the still-falling snow. Marcus's shadow shuddered and danced on the wool cart. The snow on its bench was hardly an inch thick. Marcus hooked a foot on the iron loop beside the wheel and hauled himself up. Once atop it, he pulled back the tarp. Tag lay curled in a ball like a cat. Now that the words had been said, Marcus could see where the whiskers were unevenly placed, the dye in the hair patchy. What had been an underfed, half-dim Firstblood boy resolved into a girl with Cinnae blood.

"Wh-what—" the girl began, and Marcus grabbed her shoulder and pulled her to her feet. Her lips were blue from the cold.

"Yardem?"

"Here, sir," the Tralgu said from the cart's side.

"Catch," Marcus said and shoved her over. The girl yelped as she fell, and then Yardem had her in a headlock. Her cries were wild and Yardem grunted once as a lucky blow struck. Marcus ignored the struggle. The wool was damp and stank of mildew. He lifted up bolt after bolt, letting them drop to the ground. The girl's cries became sharper, and then quiet. Marcus's hand found something hard.

"Pass me a torch," he called.

Instead, Master Kit scrambled up beside him. The old man's face expression said nothing. In the torchlight, Marcus pulled up the box. Blackwood with an iron fastener and hard leather hinges. Marcus drew his dagger and slashed at the hinges until there was enough play to let him push the blade between lid and box.

"Be careful," Master Kit said as Marcus bore down on the knife.

"Late for that," Marcus said, and the lock gave with a snap. The box hung open, limp and broken. Inside, a thousand bits of cut glass glittered and shone. No. Not glass. Gems. Garnets and rubies, emeralds and diamonds and pearls. The box was full to the brim with them. Marcus looked down into the hole he had left in the wool and snow. There were more boxes like it. Dozens of them.

He looked at Master Kit. The old man's eyes were wide with shock.

"All right," Marcus said shortly, letting the box fall closed. "Come on."

On the ground, the other guards were clustered around Yardem and the girl. Yardem still held the girl in his wide arms, ready to choke her asleep. Tears were flowing down her cheeks. The set of her jaw was all defiance and grief. Marcus pinched off a bit of the whiskers from her cheek, rubbed them between his fingers, and let them drop to the ground. Beside the Tralgu's bulk, she seemed barely more than a child. Her eyes met Marcus's, and he saw the plea there. Something dangerous shifted in his chest. Not rage, not indignation. Not even sorrow. Memory so vibrant and bright it was painful. He told himself to turn away.

"Please," the girl said.

"Kit," he said. "Take her inside. Our quarters. She doesn't talk to anyone, not even the 'van master."

"As you say, Captain," Master Kit said. Yardem loosened his grip and stood a half step back. His eyes were locked on the girl, ready to incapacitate her again if she attacked. Master Kit held out a hand to her. "Come along, my dear. You're among friends."

The girl hesitated, her gaze jumping from Marcus to Yardem to Master Kit and back again. Tears filled her eyes, but she didn't sob. He'd known another girl once who'd cried the same way. Marcus pushed the thought aside. Master Kit led her away. The others, as if by habit, followed the master actor and left the soldiers to themselves.

"The cart," Marcus said.

"No one comes near it, sir," Yardem said.

Marcus squinted up into the falling snow. "How old do you think she is?"

"Part Cinnae. Makes it hard to tell," Yardem rumbled. "Sixteen summers. Seventeen."

"That was my thought too."

"Same age Merian would have been."

"Near that."

Marcus turned back toward the cliff. Light glimmered in the stone-carved windows, and the ancient, snow-filled script carved into the cliffside above shone deep grey against the black.

"Sir?"

Marcus looked back. The Tralgu was already sitting on the cart's bench and wrapping the wool around himself in the style of Pût nomads to keep his body warm and his sword arm free.

"Don't let what happened at Ellis affect your judgment. She's not your daughter."

The emotion in Marcus's chest shifted uneasily, like a babe troubled in its sleep.

"No one is," he said and walked into the darkness.

A cup of warm cider, Master Kit's sympathetic ear, and half an hour

got the full tale. The Medean bank, the original carter's death, the desperate smuggler's run to Carse. The girl wept through half of it. She'd left the only home she'd known and the nearest she had to family. Marcus listened to it all with arms crossed, the scowl etching into his face. What caught him were the small things about her—the way her voice grew stronger when she talked about letters of exchange and the problem of capital transport, the habit she had of pushing her hair out of her eyes even when it wasn't there, the protective angle of her shoulders and her neck. Tag the Carter had been beneath his notice. Cithrin bel Sarcour, amateur smuggler, was a different matter.

When she was done, Marcus left her with the actors, took Master Kit by the elbow, and steered him out through the thin stone corridors that laced the stones of Bellin. The darkness was broken by candles at each turning; enough light to see where they were going, if not the individual steps that would get there. But walking slowly fit Marcus's needs at the moment.

"You knew about this?" Marcus said.

"I knew the girl was traveling in disguise."

"You never mentioned it."

"I didn't think it was odd. In my experience, people take on roles and put them off again quite often. Consider my own position with the caravan."

Marcus took a long, slow breath.

"All right," he said. "I'll have to take this to the 'van master. We can't stay here."

"No offense meant, Captain, but why not? It seems to me that the caravan's mission remains what it was before. Now that we know the situation, perhaps we could help the girl maintain her illusion. We could hide her cargo until spring, and carry on as if nothing were different."

"Doesn't work that way."

"What doesn't work that way, Captain?" Master Kit asked. Marcus paused at a sharp turn. The single candle gave the carved lines of the wall the aspect of life and awareness. In the dim light, the actor's face was dull gold and blackness.

"*World* doesn't work that way," Marcus said. "You never have that much money without blood coming out of it. Eventually one of us would get greedy. And even if we didn't, there's someone looking for that cart."

"But how would they find it, if they didn't also know to look for us?" Master Kit asked. Marcus noted that the man hadn't argued against the dangers of greed and betrayal.

"At a guess? They'd hear stories about a 'van being guarded by the

hero of Gradis and Wodford. And with a cunning man who can turn aside arrows and command the power of the trees."

The chagrin on the actor's face told Marcus that his point was clear.

"This isn't what I hired you on for," Marcus said, "but I need you to stay with me."

Master Kit pursed his lips, hesitated for a long moment, then turned and walked farther into the darkness between candles, heading toward the 'van master's lodging. Marcus followed him. For almost a minute, their footsteps were the only sounds.

"What are your plans?" Master Kit said, his voice cautious. Marcus nodded to himself. At least it hadn't been *no*.

"Go south," Marcus said. "West is snowbound, east is back toward whoever follows us. North is the Dry Wastes in winter. We let it be known we're taking the goods to Maccia or Gilea, trying to sell at the markets there instead of wait for Carse. Move off east, then cut south."

"I don't know of any roads going south until—"

"Not roads. We have to get off the dragon's roads and take farm tracks and local paths down to the Inner Sea. There's a pass along the coast hardly ever freezes. Put us into Birancour in four weeks if it stays cold. Five, if it thaws enough to get muddy. They don't take well to armed bands crossing the border, so anyone following us might be turned back. Another week and we're in Porte Oliva. It's a big enough city to disappear into for the winter. Or if the roads are decent, we can push on for Northcoast and Carse."

"It seems like the long way around," Master Kit said. The hallway opened out into a wider chamber where several passages came together and an oil lamp hung from a worked iron bracket, and Master Kit stopped in the light, turning to face him. The man's face was gentle and sober. "I wonder whether you've considered the other option?"

"Don't see there is one."

"We could all visit the cart, fill our pockets and purses, and vanish like the dew. Anything left, we could put in a warehouse as someone else's problem."

"That might be the wise thing," Marcus said. "But it's not the job. We keep the 'van safe until it gets where it's going."

Marcus could see the skepticism in the actor's long face, and the grim amusement. It was, Marcus knew, the moment that would decide all the rest. If the actor refused, there weren't many options left.

Master Kit shrugged.

"Then I suppose we should tell the 'van master that his plans have changed."

The caravan left just before midday under low, grey skies. Marcus rode fore. His head still ached from a night of dreams as familiar as they were vicious. Blood and fire. The dying screams of a woman and a child who were both twelve years' dust now. The smell of burning hair. It had been years since he'd woken calling for his wife and daughter. For Alys and Merian. He'd hoped the nightmares had passed forever, but clearly they had returned, at least for the time.

He'd lived through them before. He could again.

The 'van master sat at his side, their white-plumed breaths falling in and out of time. Crows watched them from snow-caked trees, shifting their wings like old men. The snow was wet, but not more than a foot thick on the road. It would be worse once they turned off the dragon's roads.

"Can't believe we're doing this," the 'van master said for the hundredth time. "They didn't even *tell* me."

"They didn't think of you as a smuggler," Marcus said.

"Thought of me as a dupe."

"Me too," Marcus said. And then to the Timzinae's outraged look, "No, *they* also thought *I* was a dupe. Not that *I* also thought *you* were."

The 'van master sank into a bitter silence. The cliffs of Bellin faded behind them. It promised to be a miserable winter. When they stopped for the night, putting up tents in the fast-fading twilight, Marcus walked through the camp with Yardem at his side. Conversations paused when they came near. Smiles grew false and unconvincing. Resentment soaked the caravan like oil on a wick. He'd have to be sure nothing happened to light it. It was no worse than he'd expected. When he came to his own tent, she was waiting for him.

Tag the Carter was gone, vanished from the world as if he'd never been. The actors had helped her wash the worst of the dye from her hair, and without the lichenous whiskers her face seemed almost unnaturally clean. Youth and her Cinnae blood conspired to make her coltish, but a few years would change her into a woman.

"Captain Wester," she said, then swallowed nervously. "I didn't get to say how much I appreciate this."

"It's what I do," Marcus said.

"All the same, it's more than I could have asked, and… Thank you."

"You aren't safe yet," Marcus said, more sharply than he'd meant. "Save your gratitude until you are."

The girl flushed, her cheeks like rose petals on snow. She half bowed, turned, and walked away, footsteps crunching in the snow. Marcus watched her go, shook his head, and spat. Yardem, still at his side, cleared his throat.

"This girl's not my daughter," Marcus said.

"She's not, sir."

“She doesn’t deserve my protection more than any other man or woman in this ’van.”

“She doesn’t, sir.”

Marcus squinted up into the clouds.

“I’m in trouble here,” he said.

“Yes, sir,” Yardem said. “You are.”

Dawson

The King's Hunt pressed through the thick-falling snow, the calling of the hounds made fainter and eerie by the grey. Dawson Kalliam leaned in toward his horse's steaming neck, feeling the great animal launch itself into the air. He saw the icy ditch as a blur beneath them, and then it was gone, and the impact of their landing gave way again to the wind-swift chase. Behind him, half a dozen voices rose, but not the king's. Dawson ignored them. To his left, a grey horse with red leather hunter's barding loomed out of the snow. Feldin Maas. Others rode close behind, nothing more than snow-drowned shadows. Dawson leaned closer to his mount, digging heels into its flanks, urging it faster.

The hart had run long and hard, nearly outwitting the hunstmen and their dogs twice. But Dawson had ridden the hills of Osterling Fells in all weather since he was a boy, and he knew the traps of them. The hart had turned down a blind canyon, and it would not return from it. The kill, of course, would be King Simeon's. The race now was to be the first to reach their prey.

The lower branches of a pine stood startling green against the void, marking where the hart had passed. Dawson turned, feeling Feldin Maas and the others crowding close behind him. Someone was shouting. The howls and yaps of the hounds grew louder. He set his teeth, willing himself forward.

Something surged on his right. Not the grey. A white horse without barding. Its rider had no helmet or cap, and the long red-gold hair announced Curtin Issandrian as clearly as a pennant. Dawson dug his heels again, and his horse leapt forward. Too fast. He felt the drumming, pounding rhythm of the gallop roughen and the horse struggled to keep its feet. The white surged forward, passing him, and a moment later the grey with Feldin Maas was at his shoulder.

If the hart had gone another thousand yards, Dawson might have retaken the position of honor, but the doomed beast stood at bay in a clearing too near. Two dogs lay dead at its feet, and the huntsmen held back the rest of the pack with their voices and short whips. A point had broken off the hart's rack, and blood marked its side. Its left hind leg was blood-soaked where an overeager hound had ripped off its dewclaw, and its patchy winter coat gave it the aspect of a traveler at the end of a journey. It turned toward them, breath white and exhausted, as Curtin Issandrian pulled to a stop, Dawson and Feldin

Maas just behind him.

"Well played, Issandrian," Dawson said bitterly.

"It's a beautiful thing, isn't it?" the victor said, ignoring him. Dawson had to admit the hart had an air of real nobility to it. Exhausted, beaten, and facing death, there was no sense of fear from it. Resignation, perhaps. Hatred, certainly. Issandrian drew his sword and saluted the beast, and it lowered its head as if in acknowledgment. The second group of riders pelted into the clearing, six together each with the sigils of their houses. The hounds leaped and barked, the huntsmen shouted and cursed.

And then the king.

King Simeon rode into the clearing on a huge black charger, the black leather reins braided with scarlet and gold. Prince Aster rode a pony at his father's side, the child's spine straight with pride and his armor still a little too large for his frame. His personal master of the hunt rode behind and behind him: a huge Jasuru in green-gold armor that matched his scales. King Simeon himself wore dark leathers studded with silver and a black helm that hid the beginnings of jowls and his skewed nose.

Dawson had been on hunts with him since they had both been boys younger than Maas and Issandrian, and he could see the weariness in the king's spine, even if no one else could. The rest of the hunting party rode behind him, the casual hunters more interested in gossip and a clean day's ride than the sport of it. The banners of all the great houses were present, the court of Camnipol come to a clearing in Osterling Fells.

The Jasuru huntsman lifted a spear from his back and held it out to King Simeon. In the king's hands, it seemed longer. The Jasuru huntsman called, and the dogs surged forward, leaping at the hart. Distracting it. King Simeon set the spear, spurred his mount, and charged. At the impact, the hart staggered back, the spear's point deep in its neck. As it fell, Dawson had the visceral sense that the beast was surprised more than pained. Death, however clearly foretold, still came unexpectedly. King Simeon's arm was as strong as ever, his eyes as keen. The hart died fast and without the need for an arrow's grace. When the huntsmen called back the hounds and lifted fists to confirm that the beast was dead, a cheer rose from the noblemen, Dawson's voice among them.

"So who took honors?" King Simeon asked as his huntsman went about unmaking the hart. "Issandrian? Or was it you, Kalliam?"

"It was so near at the end," Issandrian said, "I would say the baron and I arrived together."

Feldin Maas dropped down from his horse with a smirk and went to examine the killed dogs.

“Not true,” Dawson said. “Issandrian arrived a good length ahead of me. The honors go to him.”

And I will not carry a debt to you, even something as small as that, he thought but did not say.

“Issandrian will have the horns, then,” King Simeon said, and then, shouting, “Issandrian!”

The others raised fists and swords, grinning in the snowfall, and called out the victor’s name. The feast would come the next day, the venison cooked at Dawson’s own hearth, and Issandrian given the place of honor. The thought was like a knot in his throat.

“Are you all right?” the king said, softly enough that the words would not carry.

“Fine, Highness,” Dawson said. “I’m fine.”

An hour later, as they rode back to the house, Feldin Maas trotted alongside him. Since Vanai’s fall and the defeat of the Maccian reinforcements, Dawson had pretended that the news from the Free Cities meant nothing particular to him, but the charade chafed.

“Lord Kalliam,” Maas said. “Something for you.”

He tossed a twig to Dawson. No, not a twig. A bit of broken horn, red with the dog’s blood.

“Small honor’s better than none, eh?” Maas said with a grin, then chucked to his mount and moved forward.

“Small honor,” Dawson said bitterly and under his breath, the words white as fog.

As they rode back to the holding, the snowfall turned from deep, feathery flakes to mere specks, and the mountains to the east reappeared as the low clouds thinned and broke. The scent of smoke touched the air, and the spiraling towers of Osterling Fells stood in the south. The stone—granite and dragon’s jade—glowed with sunlight, and the garlands that hung from the battlements left the impression that the buildings themselves had come to welcome the moment’s brightness.

As host, Dawson was to oversee the preparation of the hart. It meant little more than standing in the kitchens for half an hour looking jolly, and still his soul rebelled. He couldn’t bring himself to descend into the chaos of servants and dogs. He stalked to the wide stone stairs beside the ovens and stood on the landing that overlooked the preparation tables. Along the wall, pies and loaves of bread cooled, and an ancient woman pressed peacock feathers into a pork loaf that had been sculpted to resemble the bird and candied until it shone like glass. The smell of baked raisins and chicken filled the hot air. The huntsmen arrived with the carcass, and four young men fell to preparing the meat, rubbing salt, mint leaves, and butter into the flesh, carving out the glands and veins that the unmaking had left in.

Dawson scowled and watched. The beast had been noble once, and watching it now—

"Husband?"

Clara, behind him, wore the pleasant expression she adopted in the early stages of exhaustion. Her eyes glittered, and the dimples that framed her mouth dug just a fraction deeper than usual. No one would know who hadn't spent a lifetime looking at her. He resented the court for putting that look in her eyes.

"Wife," he said.

"If we might?" she said, taking half a step toward the back hall. Annoyance tightened his mouth. Not with her, but with whatever domestic catastrophe required him now. He nodded curtly and followed her back toward the shadows and relative privacy. Before he left the landing a new voice stopped him.

"Sir! You've dropped this, my lord."

One of the huntsmen stood at the stair. A young man, wide-chinned and open-faced, wearing Kalliam livery. He held out the bit of broken, blood-darkened horn. A servant, calling Baron Kalliam back like a child for a lost bauble.

Dawson felt his face darken, his hands clench.

"What is your name," he said, and the huntsman went pale at the sound of his voice

"Vincen, sir. Vincen Coe."

"You are no man of mine, Vincen Coe. Get your things and leave my house by nightfall."

"M-my lord?"

"Do you want to be whipped in the bargain, boy?" Dawson shouted. The kitchen below them went silent, all eyes turning to them, and then quickly away.

"No, my lord," the huntsman said.

Dawson turned and stalked into the gloom of the corridor, Clara at his side. She didn't rebuke him. In the shadows of the stair, she leaned in speaking quietly and almost into his ear.

"Simeon asked for a warm bath when he came in, and instead of kicking everyone else out of the blue rooms, I had the janitor prepare Andr's house. The one by the eastern wing? It's a more pleasant space anyway, and it has those clever little pipes to keep the water hot."

"That's fine," Dawson said.

"I've left orders that no one else be let in except you, of course. Because I knew that you wanted a moment with him."

"I can't intrude on the king's bath," Dawson said.

"Of course you can, dear. Only tell him I didn't remember to warn you. I was very careful to mention that it was the place you've always preferred after a hunt, so it won't be at all implausible. Unless, of

course, he asks the servants and they say you actually use the blue rooms. But prying like that would be rude, and Simeon's never struck me that way, has he you?"

Dawson felt a weight he'd only been half aware of lift from him.

"What did I do to deserve a wife as perfect as you?"

"It was luck," she said, a faint smile penetrating her polite façade. "Now go before he finishes his bath. I'll tend to that poor puppy of a huntsman you just kicked. They really should know better than to approach you when you're in a temper."

Andr's house sat within the walls of the holding proper, tucked beside the chapel hall and otherwise apart from the main buildings. The Cinnae poet whose name it bore had lived in it when Osterling Fells had been the seat of a king with a penchant for the art of lesser races, and Antea only the name of a minor line of noblemen half a day's ride to the north. None of Andr's poems had survived the centuries. The only marks that she had left on the world were a small house that bore her name and a carving in the stone doorway—DRACANI SANT DRACAS—whose meaning was itself forgotten.

King Simeon lay in a bath of worked bronze shaped into a wide Dartinae hand, the long fingers turned back to the palm and dribbling steaming hot water from channels just beneath the claws. A stone bowl of soap rested in a shelf on the thumb. A window of stained glass turned the warm air green and gold. The body servants stood at the back wall with soft cloths to dry the king and black swords to defend him. The king looked up as Dawson stepped into the room.

"Forgive me, sire," Dawson said. "I hadn't known you were here."

"It's nothing, old friend," Simeon said, gesturing to the body servants. "I knew I was intruding on your private haunts. Sit. Enjoy the heat, and I'll make way for you as soon as I have feeling back in my toes."

"Thank you, sire," Dawson said as the servants brought a stool for him. "As it happens, I was hoping to discuss a matter with you in private. About Vanai. There's something it would be best you hear from me."

King Simeon sat up, and for a moment, they weren't lord and subject noble, but Simeon and Dawson again. Two boys of blood and rank, full of their own pride and dignity. Dawson's disdain for the Vanai campaign and outrage at his own son being set to serve under Alan Klin were well-known matters. Still, Dawson rehashed them, building up his anger and self-righteousness to a speed that would carry him through his confession. Simeon listened and the body servants ignored everything with equal care. Dawson watched the old,

familiar face as it passed from curiosity to surprise to disappointment and settled at the end in a species of amused despair.

"You have to stop playing games like that with Issandrian's cabal," the king of Imperial Antea said, leaning back in his bath. "And still, I wish to God it had worked. Would have saved me half a world of trouble. You've heard about the Edford Charter?"

"The what?"

"Edford Charter. It's a piece of parchment a priest found in the deepest library of Sevenpol that names the head of a farmer's council under King Durren the White. There's a petition in the north to name a new farmer's council on the strength of it. Any landholder with enough crops to pay in would have a voice in court."

"You can't be serious," Dawson said. "Are they going to drive mules through the palaces? Keep goats in the Kingspire gardens?"

"Don't suggest it to them," the king said, reaching for the bowl of soap.

"It's a gambit," Dawson said. "They'll never do it."

"You don't understand how split the court is, old friend. Issandrian is well loved by the lowborn. If they gain power, he gains with them. And now with Klin as his purse in Vanai, I don't see that I have a great deal of leverage."

"You can't mean—"

"No, there can't be a farmer's council. But there's peace to be made. At midsummer, I'm sending Aster to be Issandrian's ward."

The great bronze fingertips dripped. A passing cloud dimmed the light. King Simeon sat quietly lathering his arms, expressionless as the implications unfolded themselves between them.

"He'd be regent," Dawson said, his voice thick and strangled. "If you died before Aster came of age, Issandrian would be regent."

"Not a sure thing, but he'd have a claim to it."

"He's going to have you killed. This is treason."

"This is politics," Simeon said. "I had hoped Ternigan would keep the city for himself, but the old bastard's independent-minded. He knows Issandrian's cabal is on the rise. Now he's done them a favor without quite throwing himself in their camp. I'll have to woo him. They'll have to woo him. He'll be sitting in Kavinpol getting kissed on both cheeks."

"Curtin Issandrian will *kill* you, Simeon."

The king lay back, dark water running up his arms and darkening his hair. A scum of soap floated and spun on the water.

"He won't. As long as he has my son, he can call my tunes without the bother of sitting on a throne."

"Then break him," Dawson said. "I'll help you. We can build a cabal of our own. There are men who haven't forgotten the old ways.

They're *hungry* for this. We can rally them."

"We can, yes, but to what end?"

"Simeon. Old friend. This is the moment. Antea needs a true king now. You have it in you to be that man. Don't send your boy to Issandrian."

"The time's not right. Issandrian's on the rise, and opposing him now will only add to the strife. Better to wait until he stumbles. My work now is to see that we don't follow the dragon's path along the way. If I can give Aster the kingdom without a civil war, it will be legacy enough."

"Even if it's not the true Antea?" Dawson said, an ache gathering behind his eyes. "What honor is there in a kingdom that's lost its heritage to these preening, self-important children?"

"If you'd said it before Ternigan handed him Vanai, I might have agreed. But where's the honor in fighting a battle you can't win?"

Dawson looked at his hands. Age had thickened his knuckles and cold chapped his skin. The smell of soap mocked his nose. His boyhood friend, his lord and king, sighed and grunted, shifting in his bath like an old man. Somewhere in Osterling Fells, Curtin Issandrian and Feldin Maas were drinking his wine, toasting each other. Laughing. Dawson's cheeks ached, and he forced himself to relax his jaw.

Where's the honor in fighting a battle you can't win? hung in the air between them. When he could keep the disappointment out of his voice, Dawson spoke.

"Where else would it be, my lord?"

Cithrin

The dragon's roads behind them, the world turned to snow and mud. The cart beneath her lurched through ruts and holes, the mules before her strained and slipped, and the wheels grumbled and spat through the churn the carts ahead of her had left. Cithrin sat, reins in her numbed fingers, her breath making ghosts, and watched the low hills give way to plains, the forests thin and snow-sheeted scrub and brambles take their place. In springtime, the land surrounding the Free Cities might be green and alive, but now it seemed empty and eternal.

They passed a field with stacks of rotting hay that testified to some farmer's tragedy. A vineyard where row after row or trellis supported black, dead-looking woody vines. Now and again, a snow hare would bound along, almost too far away to see. Or a deer would stray near until one of the carters or the guards shot an arrow toward it in hope of fresh venison. From what she could tell, they never hit.

Mostly it was cold. And the days were still getting shorter.

The caravan master stopped them for the night at an abandoned mill. Cithrin pulled her cart to a stop beside the ice sheet of the pond, unhooked her mud-spattered mules, and rubbed them clean as they ate. The sun hung low and bloody in the west. Opal came to check on her, and the woman's mild eyes seemed pleased by what she saw.

"We'll make an honest carter of you yet, my dear," she said.

Cithrin's smile hurt her cold-burned cheeks. "A carter, maybe," she said. "Honest is another question."

The older woman's eyebrows rose. "More humor," Opal said. "The world may stop turning. Are you coming to the meal?"

"I don't think so," Cithrin said, looking at one of the mules' hoofs. The small sore she'd seen the day before was still there, but hadn't gotten worse. "I don't like being with them."

"Them?"

"The others. I don't think they like me. If it wasn't for me, they'd all be in Bellin sitting around a fire grate. And the captain…"

"Wester? Yes, he is a bit of a bear, isn't he? I still don't know quite what to make of him myself," Opal said, her voice dry and speculative and on the edge of flirtation. "Still, I'm sure he wouldn't bite unless you asked him."

"All the same," Cithrin said. "I think I'll stay with the cart."

"I'll bring you a plate, then."

“Thank you,” Cithrin said. “And Opal?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you.”

The guard smiled and dropped a small, ironic curtsey. Cithrin watched her walk back toward the mill house. Someone was lighting a fire in there, thin smoke rising from the stone chimney. Around her, the snow glowed gold and then red, and then between one moment and the next, grey. Cithrin laid blankets on her mules and lit a small fire of her own. Opal returned with a plate of stewed greens and wheat cakes, then went back to the voices and music. Cithrin stood to follow her and then sat back down.

As she ate, the stars came out. Snow made the pale blue light of a three-quarter moon seem brighter than it should have been. The cold grew, and Cithrin huddled closer to her small fire. The chill seeped in, pressing on her. Narrowing her. Later, when the captain and the Tralgu had gone out scouting and the others had gone to sleep, she’d sneak into the mill house and find a corner to curl up in. At breakfast, she’d avoid the stares and curiosity of the other carters and come back to her mules as quickly as she could. Daylight was scarce, and the caravan master didn’t leave much time for idle banter. These long, dark, cold hours between work’s end and sleep were the worst part of her day. She passed them by retreating into her mind.

She might begin by singing herself songs or recalling plays and performances she’d gone to as part of the bank. Before long, though, she found herself returning to Magister Imaniel and his constant dinner-table testing. The difference between a gift given for a consideration and a formal loan, the paradox of two parties following reason and yet coming to a solution to no one’s advantage, the strategies of a single contract and the strategies of a contract that is continually renewed. The puzzles were the playthings of her childhood, and she came to them now for comfort and solace.

She found herself estimating the worth of the caravan as a whole, how much they might have gained in Carse and how much more or less they would have to offer in Porte Oliva to make the two journeys balance. She thought about Bellin, and whether taxation on passage or on boarding would make the township richer. At what point it would make as much sense to abandon the carts as to keep on. Whether Magister Imaniel had been wise to invest in a brewery and also insure it against fire. In the absence of real information, it was no more than a game, but it was the game that she knew best.

Banking, Magister Imaniel said, wasn’t about gold and silver. It was about who knew something no one else did, about who could be trusted and who not, about seeming one thing and being another. With the questions she asked herself, she could conjure him and Cam

and Besel. She could see their faces again, hear their laughter, and sink into another time and place. One where she was loved. Or no, not truly. But at least where she belonged.

Even as the night around her grew colder, the knot in her belly loosened. Her tight-curled body grew softer and more at ease. She fed larger sticks into the fire, watching the flames first dim under the weight of the wood, and then brighten as it caught. The heat touched her face and hands, and the wool wrapped around her kept the worst of the night at bay.

What would happen, she wondered, if a bank offered a greater loan to those who'd repaid an old one before the set time? The borrowers would gain more gold by the arrangement, and the bank would see its profits more quickly. *And yet,* Magister Imaniel said in her mind, *if everyone benefits, you've overlooked something.* There was some consequence that she was missing…

"Cithrin."

She looked up. Sandr, half crouched, scuttled from the shadows between the carts. One of the mules lifted his head, snorted a great plume of white breath, and went back to his rest. As Sandr sat, she heard an odd clanking of metal and the telltale sloshing of wine in a skin.

"You didn't," she said, and Sandr grinned.

"Master Kit won't mind. He stocked up again as soon as we reached Bellin, getting ready for the winter. Only now he's got to haul it through the back end of the world. We'll be doing him a favor, lightening the load."

"You are going to get in so much trouble," she said.

"Never happen."

He opened the skin with a gloved hand and held it out to her. The smell of the fumes warmed her almost before the wine. Rich and strong and soft, it washed her mouth and tongue, flowed down her throat. The warmth of it lit her like she'd swallowed a candle. There was no sweetness to it, but something deeper.

"*God,*" she said.

"It's good, isn't it?" Sandr said.

She grinned and took another long drink. Then another. The warmth spread into her belly and started pressing out toward her arms and legs. Reluctantly, she passed it back.

"That's not all," he said. "I've got something for you."

He pulled a canvas bag out from beneath his cloak. The cloth reeked of dust and rot, and something in it shifted and clanked as he put it on the snow. His eyes sparkled in the moonlight.

"They were in the back storeroom. And a bunch of other things. Smit found them really, but I thought of you and I traded him."

Sandr pulled out a cracked leather boot laced with string. A complication of rusted metal clung to the sole, dark and dingy except for a knifelike blade running the length that shone bright and new-sharpened.

"Ever skated?" Sandr asked.

Cithrin shook her head. Sandr pulled two pairs of boots out of the sack, the ancient leather grey in the dim light. She took another long drink of the wine.

"They're too big," he said, "but I put some sand inside. Sand's good because it shifts to fit the shape of your foot. Cloth just bunches up. Here, try them."

I don't want to, Cithrin thought, but Sandr had her foot in his hand, stripping off her boot, and he was so pleased with himself. The skate was cold and the bent leather bit into the top of her foot, but Sandr pulled the string laces tight and started on her other foot.

"I learned how in Asterilhold," Sandr said. "Two… no, God, three years ago. I'd just joined the troop and Master Kit had us in Kaltfel for the winter. So cold your spit froze before it hit the ground, and the nights went on forever. But there's a lake in the middle of the city, and the whole time we were there, you could cross it anywhere. There's a winter city they build on the ice every year. Houses and taverns and all. Like a real town."

"Really?" she said.

"It was brilliant. There. I think that's done it. Let me get mine on."

She took another mouthful of the fortified wine, and it pressed its heat out toward her fingers and toes. Somehow, they'd already gone through half the skin. She felt it in her cheeks. And the fumes made her head feel muzzy and bright. Sandr struggled and grunted, the knife-shoe of the skates creaking and rattling. It seemed impossible that anything so awkward would actually work until he had the last strap in place, half walked and half wobbled to the pond, and then pressed himself out onto the ice. Between one breath and the next, he became grace made flesh. His legs scissored and shifted, the blades hissing as they scored the ice. His body shifted and swooped as he slid across the pond and then back, his arms graceful as a dancer's.

"They're not bad," he called. "Come on. You try."

Another drink of wine, and then one more for luck, and Cithrin maneuvered herself out. Cold air bit at her, but only with dull teeth. Her ankles shifted as she fought to make sense of this new way of balancing. She tried to push off the way Sandr did, and fell hard on the ice. Sandr laughed his delight.

"It's hard the first time," he said, hissing to her side. "Give me your hand. I'll show you."

Within minutes, her knees were bent, her arms widespread, and her

feet chopping at the ice. But she didn't fall.

"Don't try to walk," Sandr said. "Push with one foot, glide on the other."

"Easy for you," she said. "You know what you're doing."

"This time. I was worse than you when I started."

"Flatterer."

"Maybe you're worth flattering. No, like that. That's it. *That's* it!"

Cithin's body caught the trick, and she found herself gliding. Not quite as gracefully and certainly as Sandr, but closer. The ice sped under her, white and grey and black in the moonlight. The night tasted like the fortified wine and moved like a river flowing around her. Sandr whooped and took her hand, and together they raced the length of the mill pond, the grooves of their skates tracing white lines in the dim.

From the banks, one of the mules commented with a grunt and flick of his haunch. The wind of Cithin's passage whuffled in her ears. She felt herself grinning and spinning. The knot in her belly was a memory, a dream, a thing that happened to another person. She fell twice more, but it only seemed funny. The ice was cloud and sky, and she had learned how to fly. It creaked and groaned under her weight, and Sandr clapped his hands as she made an elaborate and awkward curtsey in the center of the pond.

"Race me," he shouted. "There and back."

Like an arrow from a bow, Sandr sped for the far bank, and Cithrin followed him. Her legs ached, and her heart beat like a boulder rolling down a hill, her numb face made itself a mask. Sandr reached the edge of the ice, pushed off from the snow, and sped past her, going back toward her cart. Cithrin turned too, pushing faster, harder. In the middle of the pond, the ice darkened and complained, but then she was over it, almost at Sandr's back, skating beside him, past him. Almost past him.

Her skate slammed into the snow and the dead, winter-killed reeds. The moon-blued ground rose up and hit her so hard she couldn't breathe. Sandr lay beside her, his eyes wide, his cheeks as red as if she'd pinched them. The look of surprise and concern on his face was so comic that, when she could, Cithrin started laughing.

Sandr's laughter twinned with hers, and he threw a handful of snow in the air, the flakes drifting down around them like dandelion fluff. And then he rolled to her, resting his weight against her side. His lips were on hers.

Oh, she thought. And then, half a breath later, she tried kissing him back.

It wasn't as awkward as she'd expected it to be. His arms shifted around her, his body entirely on hers now, pressing her into the snow

that didn't seem cold at all. His hand fumbled at her jacket, and then the thick wool sweater. His fingers found her skin. She felt herself arching up, pressing herself into the touch almost as if she were watching it be done. She heard her breath grow ragged.

"Cithrin," Sandr said. "You need to… You need to know…"

"Don't," she said.

He stopped, pulling back. His hand retreated from her breasts. Contrition narrowed his face. She felt a flare of impatience.

"Don't *talk,* I mean," she said.

She'd always known about sex in a general way. Cam had talked about it in dour, stern, and warning tones. She'd seen the mummers in the spring carnival dancing through the torchlit streets in masks and nothing more. Perhaps there should have been no mystery. And still, as she undid her belt and pushed down the rough pants, she wondered whether this was what Besel had done with all those other girls. All the ones that weren't her. Had it been like this for them? She'd heard it hurt the first time. She wondered what that would feel like. Sandr's bare flanks shone nearly as pale as the snow. Concentration possessed him as he tried to pry off his skates without rising up.

I hope it's all right that I don't love him, she thought.

A roar came out of nowhere, deep and violent and sudden. Sandr rose up into the air, his weight gone, his eyes round in surprise. Cithrin grabbed for her waistband. Her first thought was that a monstrous bird had come down from the sky and plucked him away.

Captain Wester threw Sandr out onto the ice, where he landed awkward and skidding. The captain's sword hissed out of its scabbard, and he moved toward Sandr, cursing in three languages. Cithrin rose to her knees, tugging at her clothing. Sandr stumbled back, his still-erect penis bobbing comically, and slipped.

"I wasn't forcing her," Sandr squeaked. "I wasn't forcing."

"Do I care?" Wester shouted, pointing with his sword at the wineskin half covered by snow. "You get her stupid drunk to get her knees apart, and you want a good-conduct medal?"

"I'm not drunk," Cithrin said, realizing that she likely was. Wester ignored her.

"Touch her again, son, and I cut something off you. Best pray it's a finger."

Sandr opened his mouth, but only a high whine came out.

"Stop it!" Cithrin shouted. "Leave him alone!"

Wester turned to her, rage in his eyes. Taller than she was, twice as broad, and with naked steel in his hand, he made the small, still part of her mind tell her to be quiet. Wine and embarrassment and anger washed her forward.

"Who are you to tell him what he can and can't?" she said. "Who

are you to tell *me*?"

"I am the man who's saving your life. And you will do as I say," Wester shouted, but she thought there was a new confusion in his eyes. "I won't have you turning into a whore."

The word bit. Cithrin balled her fists until her knuckles ached. Blood lit her cheeks and roared in her ears. When she spoke, she shrieked.

"I wasn't going to *charge him*!"

Wester looked at her as if seeing her for the first time. The confusion deepened, knitting his brow, and something like amusement plucked at his mouth. And then—inexplicably—anguish.

"Captain," a new voice growled, and the Tralgu loomed out of the darkness.

"Not a good time, Yardem," Wester said.

"Took that from the shouting, sir. There's soldiers."

Wester changed between one heartbeat and the next. His face cleared, his body pulled back a degree. Their confrontation evaporated, and Cithrin felt herself unnerved by the sudden shift. It seemed unfair that the captain had abandoned their conflict with things still unsettled.

"Where?" Wester asked.

"Camped over the ridge to the east," the Tralgu said. "Two dozen. Antean banner, Vanai tents."

"Well, God smiled," Wester said. "Any chance their scouts overlooked us?"

"None."

"Did they see you?"

"No."

Cithrin's rage collapsed as the words fought through the wine fumes and trailing remnants of anger. Wester was already pacing the length of her cart. He considered Sandr still wobbling on his skates, the half-buried wineskin, the pond with the white scoring of blade tracks still on the ice.

"Sandr," he said. "Get Master Kit."

"Yes, sir," Sandr said and awkwardly scampered off toward the mill house.

Wester sheathed his sword absentmindedly. His eyes shifted across the landscape, searching for something. Cithrin waited, her heart in her throat. They couldn't run. Against two dozen, they couldn't fight. Any goodwill she might have expected from Wester was certainly gone now.

The seconds stretched by endlessly. Wester took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"We'll need a broom," he said.

Geder

The bitterly cold predawn breeze murmured through the walls of Geder's tent and set the flame on his oil lamp dancing. He leaned closer, then cursed softly and turned up the wick. The flame brightened and then smoked. He backed it down slowly until the smoke disappeared. In the brighter light, the pale ink grew, if not clear, at least legible. He stuck his hands into his armpits for warmth and leaned in closer.

> And so it came that in these final days, the three great factions entered into a war of both blood and terrible cunning such that measureless stone ships flew through the skies with great iron thorns that slaughtered dragons as they flew and also deep pods found manners to hide themselves from their enemies until they should be forgotten that they might attack an unprotected enemy and also swords envenomed to slay both master and slave. The mighty silver-scaled Morade, maddest and mightiest of the warring clutch-mates, fashioned a tool more devious than the world had known, and in the high mountains south of Haakapel (which, Geder thought, would be Hallskar now) and east of Sammer (which Geder was almost certain was the fifth-polis name for the Keshet), he forged the Righteous Servant to whom none could lie nor no one could long disbelieve, and its sigil was of cardinal and intercardinal showing the eight directions of the world in which no falsehood could hide, and in this great Morade found his subtlest power.

He rubbed his eyes. The thick, yellowed pages of the book smelled of dust and mold and the odd sweet binder's glue that no one had used in half a thousand years. When he'd found it in the deep shadows of a rag-and-bone shop in Vanai, it delighted him. As he struggled through his translation, his enthusiasm waned.

The author claimed to have copied and translated a much older scroll, long since lost, that dated back to the first generations after the fall of the Dragon Empire. That was, for the first part, a framing device for speculative essay so trite and overdone that Geder's heart sank when he read it. In the second part, it meant that everything else in the essay was presented as legitimate history, which he found less

interesting. And finally, the author had embraced long sentences and complex grammar in an attempt to make the text feel authentic, and it made every page an endurance test. By the time Geder reached the verbs, he had to turn back and remind himself what they were talking about.

If he'd been back in Vanai, he would have put the work aside. But Sir Alan Klin, Protector of Vanai, had heard of the caravan smuggling out the secret wealth of the city and made its recovery his first priority. This meant sending his favorites along the dragon's roads to Carse, and every man's status after that took his search party farther and farther from the likely hunting grounds until Jorey Kalliam was left with the Dry Wastes, Fallon Broot on the sea road to Elassae, and Geder Palliako leading two dozen half-mutinous Timzinae soldiers through the icy mud of the southernmost of the Free Cities.

In their weeks on the farmer's tracks and game trails, they'd found three caravans. Small affairs hardly more than three carts each, and all of them tracking winter goods between local cities and towns. In between, days of mud and nights of nagging cold wore on Geder. And as poor a companion as his essay on the powers of dragons to unmake lies might be, it outshone the soldiers. At the end of the day, he curled into his bed, sleeping while the others drank and sang and cursed the snow. In the mornings, he rose with the cook, reading and translating and pretending that he was anywhere besides here.

A discreet scratch came at the door, and his squire stepped in along with the Timzinae who acted as his second. The squire carried a tray with a shaped-bone bowl of stewed oats with raisins and an earthenware bottle of hot, dark, oily water that pretended to be coffee. The Timzinae made a formal salute. Geder closed the book as the squire laid his food out before him.

"What are the scouts saying?" Geder asked.

"The carts haven't moved," his second said. "They aren't more than two hours' march."

"Well, no hurry then," Geder said with more cheer than he felt. "Tell the men we'll break camp after we eat and have this done with by midday."

"And after?"

"South and west," Geder said around a mouthful of oats. "That's where the road goes."

The second nodded and saluted again, turned on his heel, and left. Geder had the feeling that there was contempt in the movement, but he might only have been seeing what he expected to see. As he ate, the seams of his tent began to grow more distinct. Voices rose, men calling to each other, horses complaining, the chopping sound of planks coming down from the cooking platform. Outside, the sky

moved from darkness to grey to a blue-and-white daybreak more light than warmth. By the time the weak sun had taken the worst chill from the air, Geder was mounted, and his men ready to march. According to the scouts, the newly sighted caravan was at least a decent size.

Still, Geder didn't have any real hope for more than another disappointing search and sullen locals until he saw the Tralgu.

It was sitting on the outermost cart, its ears pricked forward with an interest that didn't show in the rest of its face. Wester's second was supposed to be a Tralgu. Geder swept his eyes over the carts huddled around the old mill, counting under his breath. Information was always sketchy, memory unreliable, and carts in a rough group could be hard to count, but it was near enough to what they'd been searching for that Geder's heart began to beat a little faster.

A Timzinae in a thick wool robe walked down the road toward them. Geder motioned, and his six archers fanned out on the road behind him. The Tralgu sat forward and flicked an ear.

"You're master of this 'van?" Geder asked.

"I am," the Timzinae said. "Who the fuck are you?"

"I am Lord Geder Palliako of Rivenhalm and representative of King Simeon and Imperial Antea," Geder said. "Where are you coming from?"

"Maccia. Going back there too. Bellin's snowed over."

Geder stared down at the black eyes. The nictatating membranes slid closed and open again, blinking without blinking. Geder wasn't sure if it was a lie. It was possible, of course, that there was more than one 'van in the Free Cities with a Tralgu guard. This might still be a false alarm.

"You've stopped here?"

"Axle came loose on one of the carts. Only just got it strapped back in place. What's this all about?"

"Who's your guard captain?" Geder asked.

The 'van master, turned, spat, and pointed to a man leaning against one of the carts. A Firstblood with a blank, friendly face and an air of restrained violence. Wheat-colored hair touched by grey. Broad across the shoulder. It might have been Marcus Wester. It might have been a thousand other men.

"What's his name?"

"Tag," the 'van master said.

One of the soldiers in the road behind him spoke, his voice too low for Geder to make out the words. Another replied. He felt a blush crawling up his neck. Either the man was lying to him or he wasn't, and every moment that Geder hesitated, he felt more like a fool.

"Get your guards out onto the road," he said. "Put the carters with their carts."

“And why would I do that?”

Someone chuckled. Geder’s embarrassment turned to rage.

“Because if you don’t, I’ll have you killed,” he shouted. “And because you had the temerity to question me, I’ll have every weapon and piece of armor in a pile on the road ten paces from your guardsmen. And if I find so much as a work knife overlooked, I’ll leave your corpse for the *crows.*”

The nictatating membrane slid open and closed. The caravan master turned around and trudged back toward the carts. Geder motioned his second closer.

“Send men around the sides. If anyone tries to sneak away, bring them back alive if you can. Dead if you have to. We’re searching this place down to the pegs and nails.”

“The mill house too?” the second asked.

“Everything,” Geder said.

The Timzinae nodded and moved back, calling to his men. Geder watched the carts, anger and embarrasment giving way to anxiety. The captain and the caravan master exchanged a few words, and the captain looked up. He frowned at Geder, shrugged, and turned away. If there was going to be resistance, it would come now and it would come hard. Geder shifted in his saddle, the still-healing wound in his leg aching in anticipation. Movement came from the mill house, from every cart. How many soldiers would they have? If the full wealth of the Medean bank was sitting in those carts, every carter would be a swordsman or an archer. Geder’s scalp began to crawl. If they had bowmen hidden in those carts, he’d be sprouting arrows. Fear shifted in his belly like he’d eaten bad fish. Trying to seem casual, he turned his horse and trotted to the rear of their formation.

To judge by the expressions of the soldiers, he hadn’t fooled anybody.

The first of the guards lumbered out from the carts, half a dozen swords in her arms like firewood. She dropped them on the ground where Geder had ordered. Then a thin boy hardly old enough to be a soldier with two unstrung bows and a backload of quivers. Slowly, the unpromising parade went on, the sad pile of arms and armor growing until ten guards and a wild-haired cunning man marched out to the road in wool and cotton, counted ten paces from the heap, and stood in the clear, hugging themselves against the cold.

“Move in,” Geder said.

The soldiers walked forward, blades drawn. The carters stood by their carts and smiled or frowned or looked around in confusion. Geder rode a slow turn around the little encampment. The sound of the search seemed to follow him—voices fierce and querulous, wood clacking, metal clanging against metal. He watched as his men pulled

ingots of pig iron out of a cart and dropped them to the ground. One man scratched at the metal to be sure it was only what it seemed, then spat and turned back to the search.

Midday came and went. A chill wind picked up, setting the snow to skitter and swirl around their ankles. The soldiers unloaded each cart, looked under them, examined the horse and mules, and began going through the mill house. Geder got off his horse at the edge of the mill pond and looked at the bare carts, the frigid carters, the ineffectual sun in the watery sky. One of the carters—a sickly-looking girl with pale hair and skin—crouched by bolts of fallen wool and pretended not to watch Geder. He knew what she saw. A puffed-up nobleman bullying her and her friends. He wanted to go to her, to explain that it wasn't like that. That *he* wasn't like that.

Instead, he turned away. The shifting dust of snow moved over the ice like ripples on water. Geder walked along the edge, trying not to feel the girl's gaze on him. Some idiot had been skating. White marks showed where blades had cut across the thin ice. Lucky they didn't break through. He'd read an essay once outlining the time it took each of the thirteen races to die in icy water. Well, twelve, really. The Drowned weren't…

Geder stopped almost before he knew what stopped him. On the edge of the pond, a long, low drift of snow swept out onto the ice. The white blade marks vanished into it, and then out of it again as if the skater had passed directly through the little drift. Or it hadn't been there until after the skater had passed. Geder walked closer. The snow itself looked odd. It didn't have the ice-crust he expected, and it was smooth as broom-swept sand. Geder looked up. The guards were on the far side of the caravan. His own soldiers grouped at the mouth of the mill house. He walked around the curious snow.

Deep scores and marks marred the surface of the ice. Poking out just at ankle height, something black and square. He squatted, brushing the snow away. A box, half drowned in recently cut ice and then covered over. And others beside it, all of them crusted over with thin ice and hidden by the carefully arranged snowdrift. He looked up. The girl carter was standing now, craning her neck to see him, her hands knotted at her belly. Geder took out his knife and forced the latch. Topaz, jade, emerald, pearl, gold and silver filigree as delicate as frost. Geder pulled back like the gems had stung him, and then, as he understood what he was seeing, felt a sunrise in his chest, relief and pleasure rushing through him, unknotting his muscles and bringing a grin to his face.

He'd done it. He'd found the missing caravan and the hidden wealth of Vanai. No more of Geder Palliako, the expendable idiot. No more apologizing for what he liked to read or the roundness of his belly.

Oh, no. His name would be carried back to Camnipol and King Simeon on a carriage of gold by horses with rubies on their reins. He would be the talk of the court, praised and honored and celebrated in the highest circles of the kingdom.

Except, of course, that he wouldn't. The name that would be celebrated in Camnipol was Alan Klin's.

Alan Klin, who'd humiliated him. Who'd burned his book.

Geder took a long, deep breath, let it out slowly, and closed the lid. A moment later, he opened it again, dug two double handfuls of gems out, and poured them down his shirt. The lovely little stones gathered around his belly where his belt cinched tight. He closed his jacket to cover the lumps, lowered the lid again, and scraped the snow back over it. As he stood, a wide, black joy filled him and made his first pleasure seem weak. When he walked back to the carts, he didn't need to remind himself to hold his head high. The girl watched him approach. Geder grinned at her like he was greeting an old friend or a lover. An accomplice. Briefly, he lifted a single finger to his lips. *Don't tell.*

The girl's eyes went wide. Half a breath later she nodded, only once. *I won't.* He could have kissed her.

When he found his second, the Timzinae had finished leading the common soldiers through the mill house. Geder noticed that the conversation among the soldiers stopped when he walked in the room, but this time it didn't bother him. The interior of the house smelled of mold and smoke, and the signs of the caravan's night in the shelter marked the stones of the flooring. A broom leaned against the far wall. Its head was wet, and a thin puddle of water darkened the stones beneath it. Geder pointedly ignored it.

"What have you found?" he asked.

"Nothing, my lord," the second said.

"We're wasting time here," Geder said. "Gather the men. We should move on."

The second looked around. One of the soldiers—a young Timzinae with black scales that shone like he'd polished them—shrugged.

"My lord, we haven't turned the basement. If you'd like—"

"Do you really think there's a point to it?" Geder asked. When the second didn't reply at once: "Honestly."

"Honestly, no."

"Then let's get the men together and go."

The caravan master, sitting on a stool, made a rough impatient noise in the back of his throat. Geder turned to him.

"On behalf of empire and king, I apologize for this inconvenience," he said with a bow.

"Think nothing of it," the 'van master said sourly.

Outside, the soldiers fell into position as they had every time before. Geder lifted himself to his own saddle carefully. His belt held. The gems and jewels dug at his skin, pinching a little at his sides. None fell out. The caravan guards watched with well-feigned lack of interest as Geder drew his sword in salute, turned his horse, and moved forward at a gentle walk. With every step they took away from the caravan, he felt his spine relax. The sun, already sliding down toward the horizon, half blinded him, and he craned his neck, counting the soldiers behind him to make sure no one had doubled back or been left behind. None had.

At the top of the ridge, Geder paused. His second came to his side.

"We can make camp at the same place as last night, my lord," he said. "Strike out south and west in the morning."

Geder shook his head. "East," he said.

"Lord?"

"Let's go east," Geder said. "Gilea's not far, and we can spend a few days someplace warm before we go back to Vanai."

"We're going back?" the second asked, his voice carefully neutral.

"May as well," Geder said, struggling against his smile. "We aren't going to find anything."

Dawson

Winter business.

The words themselves reeked of desperation. From the longest night to first thaw, noblemen took to their estates or they followed the King's Hunt. They took stock of what sort of men their sons were becoming, reacquainted themselves with wives and mistresses, looked over the tax revenue from their holdings. To the highborn, winter meant domesticity and the work of the hearth. Much as he loved Camnipol, passing through the wind-chilled, smoke-stinking streets put Dawson in the company of professional courtiers, merchants, and other men of uncertain status. But his cause was just, and so he bore the insult to his dignity.

Nor was he the only one to suffer it.

"I don't understand why you hate Issandrian so deeply," said Canl Daskellin, Baron of Watermarch, Protector of Northport, and His Majesty's Special Ambassador to Northcoast. "He's entirely too pretty and full of himself, it's true, but if you take being self-impressed and ambitious as sinning, you won't find any saints in this court."

Dawson sat back in his chair. Around them, the Fraternity of the Great Bear seemed almost empty. Seats and cushions upholstered in raw silk or Cabral damask sat empty. Black iron braziers squatted in rooms built to be cool in midsummer. The servant girls, so often hard-pressed to tend the needs of the fraternity members, haunted the shadows and doorways, waiting for a sign that something might be wanted. At summer's height, there might be a hundred men of the best breeding in the empire drinking and smoking and conducting affairs of court in these grand and comfortable rooms. Now, if Dawson spoke too loud, it echoed.

"It isn't the man," Dawson said. "It's the philosophy behind him. Maas and Klin are no better, but Issandrian holds their leashes."

"Philosophical differences hardly seem to justify… What? Conspiracy?"

"Philosophy always becomes action. Issandrian and Maas and the others are willing to play to the lowest kind of man in order to gain power."

"You mean the farmer's council."

"That's one place," Dawson said. "But if they are willing to champion rabble, how long is it before the rabble choose to champion themselves? Already we have restrictions on slavery, on bed servants,

on land service. All of that within our lifetimes. And all from men like Issandrian, courting favor from laborers and merchants and whores."

Canl Daskellin gave out a low grunt. Between the thin winter light silhouetting him and the almost Lyoneian darkness of his skin, Dawson could hardly make out his expression. Still, he hadn't disagreed. And if he hadn't had concerns of his own, he wouldn't have come.

"It's time for the true spirit of Antea to put things right," Dawson said. "These hounds think they run the hunt. They must be broken, and if we wait until Prince Aster is living under Issandrian's roof…"

The silence finished his thought more eloquently than any words could. Daskellin shifted forward in his chair, muttering something obscene under his breath.

"You're sure the king intends to take that step?"

"I heard it from his own mouth," Dawson said. "Simeon is a good man, and he could be a good king too, but not without our loyalty. He's waiting for his chance to put Issandrian in his place. And I am going to provide that chance."

Soft voices came from the passage beyond, and then faded again. From the street, the clacking of steel-shod hooves. Canl drew a small clay pipe from his jacket and lifted his hand. A servant girl scurried over with a taper. With the first fragrant blue cloud of smoke, she retreated. Dawson waited.

"How?" Daskellin asked. His voice had taken on the firmness of an interrogator. Dawson smiled. The battle was half won.

"Deny Issandrian his strength," Dawson said. "Recall Alan Klin from Vanai. Alienate Issandrian from the farmers. Shatter his circle."

"Meaning Maas and Klin."

"To start, but he has other adherents as well. But that isn't enough. They gained influence because the men who understand what noble blood means are divided."

Daskellin took a long draw on his pipe, the ember glowing bright and then fading as he exhaled.

"And thus your conspiracy," he said.

"Loyalty to the king is no conspiracy," Dawson said. "It's what we should have been doing all along. But we slept, and the dogs snuck in. And, Canl, you *know* that."

Daskellin tapped the clay stem against his teeth. His eyes narrowed.

"Whatever it is," Dawson said, "say it."

"Loyalty to King Simeon is one thing. Becoming the tool of House Kalliam is something else. I am… *disturbed* by the changes Issandrian and his cabal are suggesting. But trading one man of ambition for another is no solution."

"You want me to show I'm not Issandrian?"

"I do."

"What proof do you want?"

"If I help to recall Klin from Vanai, you cannot profit from it. Everyone's quite aware that your son is under Klin's command there. Jorey Kalliam cannot take the protectorship of Vanai."

Dawson blinked, opened his mouth, closed it again.

"Canl," he began, but Daskellin's eyes narrowed. Dawson took a deep breath and let it out slowly. When he spoke, his voice was harder than he'd meant it to be. "I swear before God and the throne of Antea that my son Jorey will not take protectorship of Vanai when Alan Klin is called home. Further, I swear that no one of my house will take profit from Vanai. Now, will you swear the same, old friend?"

"Me?"

"You have a cousin in the city, I think? I'm sure you wouldn't want to give the impression that your own support of the throne is merely self-serving?"

Daskellin's laughter boomed and rolled, a deep sound and warm enough to push back the teeth of winter, if only for a moment.

"God wept, Kalliam. You'll make altruists of us all."

"Will you swear?" Kalliam said. "Will you make common cause with the men who are loyal to King Simeon and to put the restoration of tradition ahead of your own glory?"

"True servants to the throne," Daskellin said, half amused.

"Yes," Dawson said. There was no room for lightness in his voice. He was hard as stone, his intentions fashioned from steel. "True servants to the throne."

Daskellin sobered.

"You *mean* this," he said.

"I do," Dawson said.

The dark eyes flickered over Dawson's face, as if trying to penetrate a disguise. And then as it had with half a dozen men before him—men whom Dawson had chosen because he knew they were as hungry for it as he himself was—pride bloomed in the dark face. Pride and determination and a sense of becoming part of something greater and good.

"Then yes," Daskellin said softly, "I will."

The Division was the most obvious of the partitions within the city, but it was far from the only one. On both sides of the bridges, nobility held to their mansions and squares while the lesser people lived in smaller, narrower ways. Living north of the Kestrel Square meant you were of high stature. Having your stables by the southern gate meant you had good blood, but a squandered fortune. The city was complex

in ways that only her citizens could know. The streets were not the only dimension in which class could be measured. The poorest and most desperate tunneled down to coax new life out of the ruins of previous ages on which the modern city was built, living in darkness and squalor, but saving them at least from the indignities of winter.

Ice and snow turned the dark cobbles white. Carts went slowly, and mules carefully. Horses walked haltingly for fear of slipping, breaking a leg, and being slaughtered on the street where they fell. The Camnipol winter stole even the dignity of a waiting carriage, but the meeting with Daskellin had left Dawson so pleased with himself that he barely minded. He let the servant girl belt on his overcoat of dark leather with silverwork seams and bloodstone hooks, put on the broad-brimmed hat that matched it, and marched himself out into the streets toward his home and Clara.

He'd spent his boyhood in Camnipol, following his father through the rituals of power during the day and then drinking, singing, and carousing with the other highborn boys through the nights. Even now, decades later, the snow-caked stone held memories under it. He passed the thin alley where Eliayzer Breiniako had run naked after losing a bet with him the night they'd both turned fourteen. Then the wide turning that led to the streets where all the Timzinae and Jasuru made their homes: the quarter of bugs and pennies. He passed under Morade's Arch, where the last, mad Dragon Emperor had died in his clutch-mate's talons; the arc of the dragon's jade rose up almost as high as the Kingspire itself and so thin and finely worked it seemed any wind would tip it over. He passed the Chancel of Sorrial, with its soot-blackened southern wall. The cathouse where his father had taken him on his tenth birthday and bought him his first night with a woman.

The single white cloud of the sky glowed beneficently on the city, dispelling shadows. A baker's cart coming back from the market square dropped a crate of almonds, and a dozen children seemed to appear from no place, grabbing at the nuts before the carter could stop them. On the western wall, he could look down over the great plains of Antea like God looking down on the world. The wind through the streets bit and rasped on his lips and cheeks. It was the perfect city. Everything had happened here, from the fall of dragons, to the elevation of the White Prophet, to the slave riots that had brought House Antea to refound a Firstblood empire in the city that dragons built. The stones stood witness to centuries, to ages.

And now, perhaps for the first time, Dawson was taking his place in the city that he loved. He had begun the work for which Camnipol would remember him. Dawson Kalliam, Baron of Osterling Fells, who purified the court and guarded Antea on the right and proper path.

Kalliam, who gathered the defenders of righteousness. Who destroyed the agents of chaos and change.

The Undying City invited him to get drunk on his memories and the vision of a future bent to his will—a future where Curtin Issandrian and Feldin Maas were left to scuttle through filthy snow on winter business instead of him—and Dawson succumbed. If there were any warning signs before the attack, he missed them entirely.

The road curved, following the shape of the promontory's edge, and in the triangular park where two wide streets became one, three men in dark wool overcoats and leggings stood together in deep conversation. Their breath came out white as feathers, white as the sky. Dawson strode toward them, expecting them to give way before a Baron of the Court. Hard eyes met his. The men didn't move.

Annoyance intruded on Dawson's revery, then the thought that they might not recognize his rank and station. The nearest of the men opened his coat and drew a wide, curved knife. The others moved to flank. Dawson barked out a short laugh of disdain and disbelief, and the knife man rushed him. Dawson danced back, trying to draw his own sword. Even before he had his blade clear of the scabbard the thug on his left struck his elbow with a weighted club. Dawson's hand went numb and his sword fell silently to the icy ground. The knife man swung, his blade slicing through the leather overcoat and into the flesh of Dawson's chest. Dawson yelped and jumped back.

It was the farthest thing from a duel. There was no beauty in the men's movements or style, no sense of honor. Not even the grace of formal training. The knife man held his blade like a butcher, and his partners with their clubs penned Dawson in as if he might turn and flee, squealing like a frightened sow. Dawson drew himself to his full height, pressing fingers to the torn coat. The fingers of his gloves came away bloody.

"You have just made your last mistake," Dawson said. "You have no idea who you're facing."

The knife man smiled.

"Think I do, m'lord," he said, and struck again. The blade would have sunk deep into Dawson's belly if decades of training hadn't pulled him back and to the side. The club man on the left swung hard, catching him on the shoulder. As Dawson sank to his knees, it occurred to him for the first time that these were not simple street toughs looking for a few coins. It was a trap, and it was meant for him.

The club man on his right danced back and forward and back on the balls of his feet, weapon raised high and ready to come down with a skull-shattering blow. Dawson raised his arm, and the attacker vanished with a grunt. The assassins turned. A new man in grey

hunter's wool rolled on the cobbles, locked in the club man's violent embrace. When they broke, the new man leapt up. His clothes were soaked in red, as was the short sword in his hand. The thug didn't rise.

"Lord Kalliam," the new man shouted, and tossed his blade. Dawson watched it arc through the air, blood and steel. Time seemed to slow. The grip was dark leather, well used. The blade itself had a blood channel running down its center. Dawson reached out, plucking the sword from the air. The remaining club man swung at him, and, still on his knees, Dawson parried the attack.

The fallen attacker groaned, lifted himself with one hand, then slipped back into the spreading pool of red.

Dawson rose. The two assassins glanced at each other, and Dawson read the fear in them. True, he was hurt and his rescuer now unarmed. True, the numbers were merely even. And still, to go so suddenly from three men and a victim to an almost equal battle shook their confidence. The club man took a step back, half turning as if he might flee. Dawson felt his lips curl. These men were cowards.

He swung his borrowed sword fast, low, and hard. The man danced back, parrying awkwardly. To Dawson's right, the knife man shouted and leapt for Dawson's unarmed ally. The pain of Dawson's wounds faded, the chill of his own blood freezing on his chest brought a feral grin to his mouth. The club man fell back a step, and Dawson pressed in, his knees bent, his weight low, his body balanced and ready. When the weighted club made its next swing, Dawson pushed inside its arc, taking the blow on his ribs as he thrust the blade forward. The club man's breath went out of him in a white, feathery rush. There was armor under that overcoat. The assassin wasn't dead, but he was staggered. Dawson turned, brought a heel down on the man's instep, swung the pommel of his sword in a short, hard jab at his face. The unmistakable crunch of breaking cartilage transferred itself to Dawson's wrist.

The assassin bent low and rushed him, trying to bowl him over by main force. Dawson slid back, his boots finding little purchase on the icy street. The thug weighed more than him, and he was counting on that to save him in the grapple. He had misjudged Dawson's character.

Dawson dropped the sword, grabbed the thug's dark hair in his left hand, not to pull the man's head away but to steady it. He drove his thumb deep in the man's eye socket, bending at the knuckle. Something soft and terrible happened, and the man shrieked high and pained and frightened. Dawson pushed him away, and the man stumbled to his knees, hands pressed to his ruined eye and shattered nose.

The knife man and Dawson's rescuer were circling one another. The rescuer's arms were spread and weaponless. A cut on his left arm bled,

scattering droplets of scarlet on the white ice and black cobbles. A crowd was gathering on the street. Men, women, children with eyes wide and hungry taking in the violence without daring to intervene. Dawson kicked the mewling club man to the pavement and pulled the strap of his club from around his wrist. The knife man's glance spoke panic, and Dawson drew the weighted club whirring through the air, testing its balance and weight.

The knife man bolted, dark boots throwing bits of snow up behind him as he pelted away. The crowd parted, letting the thug escape rather than risk a swing of his little blade. Peasants, commoners, and serfs making way for one of their own. He wanted to feel some outrage that the simple citizens of Camnipol would allow the man to flee, but he didn't. Cowardice and the safety of the herd was the nature of the lowborn. He could as well blame sheep for bleating.

The first assassin to fall lay perfectly still, the blood around him steaming. The second club man was growing quiet too, slipping into shock. Dawson's rescuer squatted on bent ankles, considering his wounded arm. He was young, thick arms and shoulders and rough, knife-cropped hair. The shape of his face was familiar.

"It seems I owe you my thanks," Dawson said. To his surprise, he was out of breath.

The new man shook his head.

"I should have come sooner, my lord," the young man said. "I stayed too far back."

"Too far back?" Dawson said. "You've been tracking me?"

The man nodded and would not meet his eyes.

"Why is that?" Dawson asked.

"Your lady wife, my lord," the man said. "She took me into service after you turned me out. She tasked me with keeping you safe, sir. I'm afraid I've done a poor job."

Of course. The huntsman from the kitchens who'd returned the bit of horn soaked in dog's blood and insult. Vincen Coe, the name had been. He'd never asked Clara what she'd done to see to the boy, but of course she couldn't simply reinstate him over her husband's express words. And certainly it would be beneath him to say he'd been unjust with the boy.

"You're mistaken," Dawson said.

"Lord?"

"I've never seen you before, and I wouldn't have turned a man of your courage and talent out of my service."

"Yes… I mean, no, my lord."

"That's settled, then. Come along with me, we'll get these little scratches daubed."

Coe stood.

“My sword, my lord?”

“Yes. We may have need of that,” Dawson said, gesturing to where it lay, grimed with blood and snow and soot. “It seems I’m frightening all the right men.”

Marcus

Fire and blood. Merian shrieked her pain and fear and indignation as only a child could blend them. Her eyes were fixed on him, her arms reaching out. Marcus fought his paralysis, forced his arms to reach for her, and in moving them, woke himself.

The screams of the dead lingered in the cool air as he lifted himself up, still expecting in his half-dream to see the wheat fields and high, stately windmills of Ellis. Instead, the wide star-crowded sky of Birancour arched above him, the looming darkness of the mountains behind him to the east without even the suggestion of dawn. The burning smell of memory gave way to the sweet, astringent scent of ice lily and the distant presentiment of salt that was the sea.

He lay back in his bedroll and waited for the dream to fade. By long habit, he attended to his body. The constricting tightness in his throat eased first, then in his chest. The gut-punch ache in his belly faded slowly and vanished. Soon there was only the permanent hollow beneath his ribs, and he knew it was safe to stand.

They were battle scars. Some men lost a leg or a hand. Some men lost their eyes. Marcus had lost a family. And just as old soldiers knew when rain was coming from the ache of healed bones, he suffered now. It didn't mean anything. It was just his own private bad weather, and like bad weather, it would pass. It was only for the moment that the dreams were getting worse.

The caravan slept, carters and mules both, in the deep night. The watch fire glittered on the hillside above him, no brighter than a star, but orange instead of blue. Marcus made his way toward it. The dry grass hushed against his boots and field mice skittered away. Yardem Hane sat silhouetted by the small fire, back turned to keep the light from blunting his eyes. Beside him sat a less familiar form. Marcus moved close enough to make out their words.

"The *shape* of a soul?" Master Kit asked. "I think I don't understand what you mean."

"Just that. A soul has a shape," Yardem said. His wide hands patted the air in front of him. "And fate is formed by it. Whatever the world delivers to you, the shape of your soul determines what you do with it, and the actions you take make your destiny."

Marcus turned his foot, scraping the ground loud enough to announce himself.

"Morning, Captain," Yardem said without turning to look.

“You filling our cunning man’s head with your superstitious hairwash?”

“I am, sir.”

“Be careful, Kit,” Marcus said, walking into the dim circle of light. “Yardem used to be a priest, you know.”

Master Kit’s eyebrows rose and he looked his question from Marcus to Yardem. The Tralgu shrugged eloquently.

“Ended poorly,” Yardem said.

“It’s not a faith I’d heard of before,” Master Kit said. “I have to say I find the ideas fascinating. What shape is your own soul?”

“I’ve never seen my soul,” Yardem said.

Marcus sat. The warmth of the fire touched his back. High above them, a falling star streaked from east to west, fading almost before Marcus saw it. The silence felt suddenly awkward.

“Go ahead,” Marcus said. “Tell him if you want to.”

“Tell me what?” Master Kit asked.

“I have seen the captain’s. I was at Wodford the day of the battle. The captain rode by, taking count of the troop, and… I saw it.”

“And what shape was it?” Master Kit asked

“A circle standing on its edge,” Yardem said.

“What did you take that to mean?”

“That he rises when brought low and falls when placed high,” Yardem said.

“He needed magical visions to see that,” Marcus said. “Most people just take it as given.”

“But always?” Master Kit said. “Surely if God wanted to change the shape of a man’s soul—”

“I’ve never seen God,” Yardem said.

“But you believe in him,” Master Kit said.

“I’m reserving judgment,” Yardem said. Master Kit considered that.

“And what about you, Captain?” he asked. “Stories are you were a pious man once.”

“I choose not to believe in any gods as an act of charity,” Marcus said.

“Charity toward whom?”

“Toward the gods. Seems rude to think they couldn’t make a world better than this,” Marcus said. “Do we have any food left?”

The dawn crept in softly, the outline of the mountains to the east growing clearer against the stars, then the few finger-thin clouds began to glow pink and gold and light seemed to come from nowhere, to rise up from the earth like a mist. The carts changed from near-invisible hulks to wood and iron. Pot metal clanked from across the camp as the caravan master’s wife began cooking the morning’s mash of stewed grain and honeyed pork. The landscape changed from

endless featureless darkness to hills and trees, scrub and stream. Yardem ran the guards through their morning drills while Marcus walked through the camp and pretended there was no cart in the caravan he cared about more than another.

The girl, Cithrin, followed the same routine as the others. She cared for her mules, she ate her food, she scraped the mud out of her axle holes. If she needed help, she asked Opal or Master Kit. Never the caravan master, never Marcus himself. But never Sandr either, and the boy had been avoiding her like his life depended on it, so that was for the best. Marcus watched her without being obvious. She'd gotten better since they'd left Vanai. Since they'd left Bellin, for that. But there were dark pouches under her eyes and the awkwardness of exhaustion in her movements.

Marcus found the caravan master squatting beside the lead cart, a wide scroll of inked parchment on the dirt before him: a map of south Birancour probably centuries out of date, but it would still show where the dragon's roads were. His wife, breakfast duties finished, was putting their team in harness.

"Day," the caravan master said. "Day and a half at most, and we'll get onto a real road again."

"That's good."

"Another three, and we'll be in Porte Oliva. You've been there before?"

"A time or two," Marcus said. "It's a good winter port. Doesn't get too cold. The queen's governor isn't too heavy a tax hand."

"We'll stop there, then."

"Roads should be clear to Carse by early spring," Marcus said.

"Not for me," the caravan master said, folding the map. "We reach Porte Oliva, and we're done. The 'van stops there."

Marcus frowned and crossed his arms.

"There are some problems with that," he said. "The job is to see all this to Carse."

"Your job is to protect the caravan," the Timzinae said. "Mine is to say where it goes and when it stops. Porte Oliva has a market. Road trade to Cabral and Herez, not to mention the rest of the cities in Birancour. Ships to Lyoniea, and the blue-water trade to Far Syramys. The cargo I was contracted to haul will sell well enough there."

"The cargo you were contracted for," Marcus repeated, turning the words over like they tasted wrong.

"Is there something else I should care about?" The caravan master's chin jutted forward. "You're worried I might inconvenience the smuggler?"

"Last I heard, the Medean bank doesn't trade in Birancour," Marcus said. "You'll be sitting that girl on a pile of money high as a tree with

nothing to protect her. Might as well hang a sign on her neck."

The 'van master tossed his folded map on the seat of his cart and began hauling himself up beside it. His wife blinked a silent apology to Marcus and looked away.

"*That girl* and her drinking and smuggling and sinning with your guardsmen can watch out for herself," the 'van master said. "We were blind lucky with that Antean bastard. There's no reason to expect we'll be as fortunate next time."

And there will be a next time, he didn't say. He didn't need to.

"If you take my advice," the 'van master went on, "you'll take your fee, turn your horse, and ride away from that girl until she's less than a memory. People like that are only trouble."

Marcus bristled.

"What kind of people do you mean?"

"Bankers," the 'van master said, and spat.

Porte Oliva nestled on a land spur that pressed out into a wide, shallow bay. Even at low tide, the sea protected her on three sides. Reefs and sandbars made the approach from the ocean dangerous enough that local boatmen could earn their living guiding ships from the deep ocean safely into port and then out again. In the thousand years since its foundation, the city had never been taken by force, though twice it had been seduced. The dragon's road led to it, the green pathway curving up over hills long since washed away, so that the carts traveled across the tops of wide-sloping arches as the ground dropped away beneath them.

As they drew nearer the city, the road became more crowded. Where Vanai had been rich with the black-chitined Timzinae, the crowd here showed the pale, ethereal faces of Cinnae and the oily, short, bead-adorned fur of Kurtadam in greater numbers even than Firstblood. The press of carts and bodies thickened, and Marcus started to see swordsmen in with copper torcs and the green and gold of Birancour. Queensmen. The guardians of the city, though the queen herself kept to the greater cities of Sara-su-mar and Porte Silena in the north. Marcus watched the caravan master approach one of the older queensmen, lean forward as if to speak above the chirr and murmur of the crowd. A few coins traded hands, and without any obvious change, the carts soon found themselves moving faster than before, passing the foot traffic and hand barrows. Marcus knew they had reached the Porte Oliva proper when the beggars and mendicants appeared.

Please, my lord, I have a child.

My husband is a sailor. His ship is three months late, and there's no

money for food.

God tells us to be generous.

Marcus paced alongside the carts, ignoring the words and gestures, watching for the thieves and cutpurses who always lived in crowds like these. The other guards followed his example, and likely knew more about sleight of hand than he did. It was odd how well suited the players were to every part of guarding a 'van besides the actual guard duty. He reached the last cart and turned to start for the front again. Three carts ahead, Master Kit leaned down and pressed a coin into an old man's hand.

"Don't encourage them," Marcus called. "They're all liars."

"Not all, Captain," Kit called back with a grin. "Only most."

He passed the wool cart where the smuggler girl, still in her rough carter's clothes, drove her team. Put beside the full-blood Cinnae on the road, it was easier to see her as something besides a frail Firstblood girl. Her hair wasn't as fine as theirs, her features were thicker, her skin had more color, but the resemblance was there. She noticed him watching her, and tried out a smile. He ignored her with the same studied intention as the beggars, and for similar reasons. Riding on, the sense of anticipation and dread sat in his gut. The conversation would come, and it would be today, and the wise thing—the right thing, the thing that would let his nightmares fade again—was to refuse the girl. At the lead cart, Yardem met his gaze impassively.

Once, centuries before, the city had ended at the great stone embattlements. Now the towering white stone walls were in the middle of a busy market quarter. Fishmongers shouted out their catch on the north side of the arched tunnel that led to the inner city, and after they passed through, indistinguishable men and women called out the same fish. The architecture of war slept in the middle of a living community like a great hunting cat torpid from the kill. Beyond it, the dragon's road widened and stopped at a huge open square.

The crowd pressed here as thick as they had on the road. A great marble temple high as five men standing one atop the other loomed on the eastern end, the governor's palace of red brick and colored glass on the west. God's voice and the law's arm, twin powers of the throne. And between them, scattered through the square, wooden platforms rose with prisoners suffering their punishments. A Kurtadam man with rheumy eyes and severed hands held a sign between his stumps announcing himself a thief. A Firstblood woman smeared in shit and offal sat under the carved wooden symbol of a procuress. Three Cinnae men hung dead from a gallows, flies darkening the soft flesh around their eyes; a murderer, a rapist, and a child-user respectively. Together, the platforms served as a short, effective

introduction to the local laws.

The caravan master left them standing for the better part of an hour as he vanished into the governor's palace, returning with small stone figures on leather thongs to place on the carts as proof the road taxes had been paid. With a shout, he led them down a side road of hard, pale brick to the yard.

Journey's end. Marcus made his way to the front cart. The caravan master had a cloth sack waiting for him. It jingled when he held it out.

"You can count it," the Timzinae said.

"That's fine," Marcus said.

The 'van master's brows lifted, then he shrugged.

"Suit yourself. But don't come later saying it was short."

"Won't."

"All right, then."

Marcus nodded and turned away. He took out his share and Yardem's, then despite what he'd said, he counted the rest. It was all there.

The players were at their own cart, still wearing their armor and swords. The road had changed them and it hadn't. They were harder now, and each of them could handle a sword like a soldier. On the other hand, they laughed and joked now as much as they had in the tavern in Vanai. Sandr and Smit were competing now to see who could hold a handstand longest. Cary, Opal, and Mikel traded quips and barbs as they saw to their mules. Master Kit sat on the cart's high bench, watching over it all like a benevolent saint from the old stories. Marcus went to him.

"It appears we've managed the trick, then," Master Kit said. "I hadn't expected it to be quite so eventful."

"Make a fine comedy," Marcus said,

"I think the world is often like that."

"Like what?"

"Comic, but only at the right distance."

"Likely true," Marcus said as he handed the money to Master Kit. "What are you going to do now?"

"I suspect Porte Oliva's as good a venue as any, and suppose we'll try our luck at our original trade. After a bit of a rest, maybe. There's a long tradition of puppeteers here, and I'm hoping we might be able to recruit a new actor or two with those skills."

"It was good working with you," Marcus said. "Went better than I expected, considering. I expect I'll see you about the city. We'll stay until thaw."

"Thank you for not emasculating Sandr. I still hope to make a decent leading man of him one day."

"Luck with that," Marcus said.

“Take care of yourself, Captain Wester,” Master Kit said. “I find you a fascinating man.”

And that was over as well. To his left, the caravan master was passing to each cart in turn, taking signatures and inventories. Yardem appeared at Marcus’s side.

“We’ll need men,” the Tralgu said.

“And a cunning man. But there’s not a war on here. We’ll find some.”

The Tralgu flicked a jingling ear.

“Are you going to let the girl hire us, sir?”

Marcus took a deep breath. The city smelled of horse shit, fish, and brine. Haze left the sky more white than blue. He exhaled slowly.

“No,” he said.

They stood together. The ’van master reached her cart. Cithrin stood before him like a prisoner before a magistrate, spine straight, eyes ahead of her. Alone in a city she didn’t know, without protector or path.

“We could leave now,” Yardem said.

Marcus shook his head.

“She deserves to hear it.”

The ’van master moved on. Marcus looked to the Tralgu, the girl, spat, and went to her. *Do it,* he told himself, *and get the worst behind and on to the next thing.* The girl looked up as he came, her eyes unfocused and glassy with exhaustion, her skin even paler than usual. And yet she lifted her chin a degree.

“Captain,” she said.

“Yes,” he said. “Yardem and I. We can’t work for you.”

“All right,” she said. For all her reaction, he might have told her the sun rose in the morning.

“My advice, take as much as you can carry, leave the rest, and take ship out to Lyoniea or Far Syramis. Start over.”

The ’van master whistled. The first cart pulled away. The caravan officially ended. The carts around them began to shift and squeak, each bound for its own market, its own quarter. Even the players were moving off now, Sandr and Smit walking with the mules to clear the way. Cithrin bel Sarcour, orphan and ward of the Medean bank, novice smuggler, almost woman, looked at him with tired eyes.

“Good luck,” he said, and walked away.

The salt quarter of Porte Oliva was, as Master Kit had said, inhabited by puppets. Street performers seemed to be at every other corner, crouched behind or within boxes, hectoring the passersby in the voices of their dolls. Some were the standard race humor of

PennyPenny the violent Jurasu and the clever Timzinae Roaches. Some were political like the idiot King Ardelhumblemub with his oversized crown. Some, Stannin Aftellin the perpetually lustful Firstblood in his traditional love triangle with a phlegmatic Dartinae and a manipulative Cinnae, were bawdy and racial and political all together.

Many more were more local. Marcus was pausing for a moment by a performance about a filthy butcher who smoked his meat with burning shit and ground maggots into his sausage when a Cinnae woman in the crowd started yelling at the puppeteer for taking gold from a rival butcher. At another, four queensmen with swords and copper torcs watched a story about plums and a fairy princess with scowls that suggested the allegory, whatever it was, might put the performer on the wrong side of the law.

The public house they stopped at had a courtyard that overlooked the seawall. The sun was sliding down the western sky, setting the white stucco walls glowing gold. The water of the bay was pale blue, the sea beyond an indigo so deep it was almost black. The smell of brine and roasting chicken wrestled with the incense smoke from a wandering priest. Sailors of several races, thick-shouldered and loud-throated all of them, sat at the wide tables under the bright embroidered canopies. Braziers burned between every table, bringing the memory of summer to the winter-chill air. Marcus sat and caught the serving girl's eye. She nodded a promise, and he leaned back in his chair.

"We'll need work."

"Yes, sir," Yardem said.

"And a new crew. A real one this time."

"Yes, sir."

"But there will be warehouses. Come the spring, caravans going inland."

"There will, sir."

"Any thoughts, then?"

The serving girl—a Kurtadam with the soft, pale pelt of an adolescent and gold and silver beads all down her sides—brought mugs of hot cider to them and hurried off before Marcus could pay her. Yardem lifted one. In his hands, it looked small. He drank slowly, his brow furrowed and his ears tucked back. Behind him, the sun glowed bright enough to hurt.

"What it is?" Marcus said.

"The smuggler girl, sir. Cithrin."

Marcus laughed, but he felt the anger behind it. From the shift in Yardem's shoulders, the Tralgu heard it too.

"You think it would be wise to put us between that cart and

whoever wants to take it from her?"

"It wouldn't be," Yardem said.

"Then what's there to talk about? Job's done. Time to move forward."

"Yes, sir," Yardem said and took another sip. Marcus waited for him to speak. He didn't. One of the sailors—a Firstblood with close-cropped black hair and the slushy accent of Lyoneia—started singing a dirty song about the mating habits of Southlings. The large black eyes of that race often got them called *eyeholes,* which lent itself to certain rhymes. Marcus felt his jaw clench. He leaned forward, putting himself in Yardem's sight.

"You have something to say?"

Yardem sighed.

"If she were less like Meriam, you'd have stayed," Yardem said.

The dirty song went to a new verse, speculating on the sex life of Dartinae and Cinnae. Or glow-worms and maggots, as the lyrics put it. Marcus shot an annoyed glance at the singer. The tightness in his jaw was spreading down his neck and between his shoulder blades. Yardem put down his cider.

"If it had been a man driving that cart," Yardem said. "Or an older woman. Someone who looked less like Alys or wasn't the age Meriam would have been, you would have taken contract from them."

Marcus coughed out a laugh. The singer took a breath, preparing to launch into another verse. Marcus stood.

"You! Enough of that. There's grown men here trying to think."

The sailor's face clouded.

"Who the fuck are you?"

"The man telling you that's enough," Marcus said.

The sailor sneered, then blinked at something in Marcus's expression, flushed red, and sat down, his back toward Marcus and Yardem. Marcus turned back to his second.

"That cart is going to pull blades and blood to it, and we both know it," Marcus said softly. "That much wealth in one place is a call to murder. Now you're telling me that standing in front of it's the right thing?"

"No, sir. Damned foolish, sir," Yardem said. "Only you'd have done it."

Marcus shook his head. In his memory, Meriam reached out from the flames. He took her dying body in his arms. He could smell the burning hair, the skin. He felt her relax against him and remembered thinking that she was saved, that she was safe, and then realizing what the softness in her joints really meant. He didn't know anymore if it was the true memory of the events or his dreams.

Cithrin bel Sarcour. He pictured her cart. Pictured the middle-aged

Firstblood tin hauler in her place. Or the ’van master and his wife. Or Master Kit and Opal. Anyone besides the girl herself.

He rubbed his eyes until false colors bloomed in front of him. The sea murmured. The sharp apple smell of his cider cut through the cold air. The anger in his chest collapsed, nothing more than paper armor after all, and he said something obscene.

“Should I go find her, sir?”

“We better had,” Marcus said, dropping the coins for their drinks on the table. “Before she does something dangerous.”

Geder

Geder might have found it more difficult to hide his subterfuge if his failure hadn't been assumed from the start. Instead, he and his half-loyal soldiers limped back into the city, gave their thin reports, and were dismissed. Geder returned to the weak stream of his duties; enforcing taxes, arresting loyalists, and generally harassing the people of Vanai in the name of Alan Klin.

"I can't pay this," the old Timzinae said, looking up from the taxation order. "The prince had us all pay twice over before the war, and now you want as much as he did."

"It isn't me," Geder said.

"I don't see anyone else in here."

The shop squatted in a dark street. Scraps of leather lay here and there. A brass tailor's dummy wrapped in soft black hide that still smelled slightly of the tanner's yard loomed near the oilcloth window. As armor, leather that thin would be useless. Barely better than cloth, and probably worse than good quilting. As court costume, on the other hand, it would look quite impressive.

"You want it?" the Timzinae asked.

"Sorry, what?"

"The cloak. Commissioned by the Master of Canals, then he vanished in the night just before"—he held up the taxation notice in his black-scaled hand—"our *liberation* by the noble empire. It's not done, and I've got enough of that dye lot left I could recut it to fit you."

Geder licked his lips. He couldn't. Someone would ask where he'd gotten it, and he'd have to explain. Or lie. If he said he'd bought it on the cheap, maybe while he was on the southern roads or from one of the little caravans they'd searched…

"Could you really recut it?"

The Timzinae's smile was a marvel of cynicism.

"Could you misplace this?" he asked, nodding at the paper.

For a moment, Geder felt the echo of his pleasure riding away from the smugglers, gems and jewels hidden in his shirt. One lost tax notice. At worst it would keep Klin's coffers a little more sparse, his reports back to Camnipol a little less promising. It would keep the leatherman in his shop for another season; if the man had asked, Geder would probably have "lost" the notice even without the promise of a good cloak.

Besides which, compared to what he'd already done, the twenty silver coins lost to Klin were like a raindrop in the ocean.

"Putting an honest man out of work can't be to anyone's benefit," Geder said. "I'm sure we can work this through."

"Stand up on that stool, then," the Timzinae said. "I'll make sure the drape's best for your frame."

Winter was dry season in Vanai. The walls of the canals showed high-water marks feet above the thin ice and sluggish, dark flow. Fallen leaves skittered along the bases of walls, and trees stood bare and dead in the gardens and arbors. The icicles that hung from the wooden eaves of the houses grew thinner by the day, and new snow didn't come. The nights were bitter, the days merely cold. The city waited for the thaw, the melt, the rush of freshwater and life that came from a spring still months away. Everything was dead or sleeping. Geder walked through the street bouncing on his toes a little, his guardsmen following behind.

When he'd first returned, Geder had locked his doors, taken out the cloth pouch that he'd bought in Gilea, and spread the gems and jewels on his bed. Glittering in the dim light, they'd posed a problem. He had enough available wealth now to make his day-to-day life in Vanai more comfortable, but not as coin. He could sell them, of course, but giving them to gem merchants within the city risked someone recognizing a stone or a piece of metalwork. And if Klin or one of his favorites noticed that Geder had suddenly more coin than he should, nothing good could follow.

He'd answered the problem by sending his squire out to exchange only the most innocuous stones—three round garnets and a diamond in undistinguished silver. The purse of coins had silver and bronze, copper, and two thin rounds of gold frail enough to bend with his fingers. For his lifestyle, it was a fortune, and he carried a portion of it now in his satchel along with a book, ready for his last errand of the day.

The academy looked over a narrow square. In its greater days, it had been a center for the children of the lower nobility and the higher merchant class to hire tutors or commission speeches. The carved oaken archway that led into its great hall was marked with the names of the scholars and priests who had given lectures there over the century and a half since its founding. Within, the air smelled of wax and sandalwood, and sunlight filtered through high horizontal windows, catching motes of dust suspended in the air. Somewhere nearby, a man recited poetry in a deep, resonant voice. He breathed the air of the place.

Footsteps padded up behind him. The clerk was a thin Southling man, his huge dark eyes dominating his face. His body spoke of

deference and fear.

"May I help you, my lord? There isn't a problem?"

"I wanted to find a researcher," Geder said. "My squire was told this was the place to come."

The Southling blinked his huge black eyes.

"I… That is, my lord…" The clerk shook himself. *"Really?"*

"Yes," Geder said.

"You haven't come to arrest someone? Or levy fines?"

"No."

"Well. Just a moment, my lord," the Southling said. "Let me find someone that might be of use. If you'll come with me?"

In the side chamber, Geder sat on a wooden bench worn smooth by decades of use. The recitation of poems went on, the voice fainter now, the words made unintelligible. Geder loosened his belt, shifting in his seat. He had the almost physical memory of waiting for his own tutors, and pushed back the irrational anxiety that he might not be able to answer the scholar's questions. The door slid open, and a Firstblood man sidled in. Geder popped to his feet.

"Good afternoon. My name is Geder Palliako."

"You're known in the city, Lord Palliako," the man said. "Tamask said something about wanting a researcher?"

"Yes," Geder said, taking the book from his side and holding it out. "I've been translating this book, only it's not very well presented. I want someone to find more like it, but different."

The scholar took the book gently, as if it were a colorful but unknown insect, and opened the pages. Geder fidgeted.

"It's about the fall of the Dragon Empire," he said. "It's couched as history, but I'm more interested in speculative essay?"

The sound of ancient pages hushing against each other competed with the distant voice and the murmur of a breeze outside the windows. The scholar leaned close to the book, frowning.

"What are you proposing, Lord Palliako?"

"I'll pay for any books you can find on the period. If they can be bought outright, I'll pay a reward. If they have to be copied, I can commission a scribe, but that means a smaller payment for the researcher. I'm looking particularly for considerations of the fall of the dragons, and especially there's a passage in there about something called the Righteous Servant? I'd like more about that."

"May I ask why, lord?"

Geder opened his mouth, then closed it. He'd never had anyone to talk with about the question, never had to explain himself.

"It's about… truth. And deceit. And I thought it was interesting," he said gamely.

"Would you also be interested in rhetorics on the subject? Asinia

Secundus wrote a fine examination of the nature of truth during the Second Alfin Occupation."

"That's philosophy? I'll look at it, but I'd really rather it was an essay."

"You mentioned that. Speculative essay," the scholar said, the faintest sigh in his voice.

"Is that a problem?" Geder asked.

"Not at all, my lord," the scholar said with a forced smile. "We would be honored to help."

> My contention is this: given the lack of primary documents from that time, our best practice is to examine those who later claimed the mantle of the Dragon Empire, and by considering their actions infer the nature of the examples they followed. The best example of this is the enigmatic Siege of Aastapal. Direct examination of the ruins there has failed to determine whether the destruction of the city was accomplished by the assaulting forces of the great dragon Morade or, more controversially, the occupying forces of his brother and clutch-mate, Inys.
>
> Faced with this dearth of direct evidence, we may turn to better-known histories. As late as a thousand years after, we have the great Jasuru general Marras Toca in the fourth Holy Cleansing campaign. Also the Anthypatos of Lynnic, Hararrsin fifth of the name, at the battle of Ashen Dan. Also Queen Errathiánpados at the siege of Kázhamor. In each of these cases, a wartime commander claiming lineage with the last Dragon Emperor has chosen to destroy a city as a means of denying it to the enemy. If, as I will try to prove, this was done in conscious imitation of the last great war of dragons, it implies that the destruction of Aastapal was done by Inys as a tactical gambit to keep it from Morade's control rather than the generally accepted scenario.

Geder cocked his head. The argument seemed weak. For one thing, he'd never heard of two of the three examples. And then, out of all the battles and wars and sieges since the fall of dragons, he'd think you could pick instances of any strategy or decision you wanted. The case could be made just as well in the other direction by drawing different leaders, different battles. And God knew every third tyrant claimed some sort of lineage from the dragons.

And still, all specifics aside, it was a fascinating thought. When something can't be known, when the particulars are lost forever, to look at the events that followed from it, that echoed it, and trace

backwards toward the truth. Like seeing the ripples in a pond and knowing where the stone fell in. He looked up at his little room, excited. His writing desk still had a bit of ink in the well, but he'd put his pen somewhere. He laid the book open and scurried to the stack of firewood near the grate, picked up a fallen splinter, and went back to his table quickly. Rough wood dipped into the darkness, and Geder carefully marked the margin of the book. *Looking at ripples to know where the stone fell.*

He sat back, pleased. Now if there was just some discussion of the Righteous Servant…

"Lord Palliako," his squire said from the doorway. "Lord Klin banquet?"

Geder sighed, nodded, and tossed the blackened splinter into the fire. His thumb and forefinger were stained. He washed his hands in the basin, his mind only half involved in his task. The squire helped him into his formal tunic and new black leather cloak and almost led him to the door and out to the street beyond.

At home in Camnipol, the one great event of the winter was the anniversary of King Simeon's ascension. Whatever favored noble family the king chose might spend half its year's income on one night, the court descending upon it like crows on a battlefield. Geder had been twice, and the richness of the food and drink had left him vaguely ill both times.

In Vanai, Sir Alan Klin echoed the event with a great banquet and an enforced public celebration.

Festive lanterns hung along the narrow streets casting strange shadows. Musicians played flutes and beat drums as reedy Timzinae voices rose and fell in song. A thick-faced woman rolled a barrel along the street, wood thundering on the cobbles.

Geder passed local men and women dressed in their finest, all wearing mildly amused expressions. The chill air left all the Firstblood faces rosy and noses running. Doors stood open all along the street, light blazing within, to invite passersby in, but without the flags and fireshows of Antea. Last year, none of these men and women had known or cared when King Simeon had taken his crown. If the soldiers of Antea went home, the date would be forgotten again as quickly and as cynically as it had been adopted. The whole enterprise struck Geder as the empty shell of a real celebration. Tin passing itself for silver.

At the palace of the former prince, Klin had appropriated a long audience chamber for the nobility of Antea to celebrate. Here, warm air pressed at the mouth and nose. Traditional Antean foods crowded the tables—venison in mint, trout paste on twice-baked toast, sausage links boiled in wine. The press of voices was like a storm, shouted conversations echoing against the great bronze-colored arches above

them. Competing singers wandered between the tables cadging spare coins from the Antean revelers. An old servant with the red-and-grey armband of Klin's household led Geder to one of the smallest tables, far from the great fireplace where half a tree burned and popped. Geder kept his cloak. So far from the fire, it was cold.

Geder allowed a slave girl to give him a plate of food and a wide, cut-crystal glass of yeasty-smelling dark beer. In the midst of the revel, he ate by himself, mulling over questions of truth and deception, war and history. The high table—Alan Klin, Gospey Allintot, and half a dozen of the others of Klin's favorites—was a ship on the horizon to him. He didn't notice Daved Broot being ushered to his table until the boy plopped down on a bench.

"Palliako," the younger Broot said with a nod.

"Hello," Geder said.

"Good cloak. New?"

"Recent anyway."

"Suits you."

Their conversation completed, Broot took a plate and began a campaign of systematically eating as much food as possible. He seemed to take no joy in it, but Geder felt a whisper of admiration for the boy's determination. Minutes later, when Jorey Kalliam and Sir Afend Tilliakin—two more of Klin's least favored—came to the table together, Broot had already called for a second plate.

"How does your father read the situation?" Tilliakin said as the pair took their seats.

Jorey Kalliam shook his head.

"I don't think we can draw any conclusions," he said, lifting a plate of venison and a flagon of wine out of a servant's waiting hands. "Not yet."

"Still, that little banker Imaniel won't be going free anytime soon. Lord Klin must be chewing his own guts that he didn't find that caravan, eh?"

All thought of dragons, ripples, and eating prowess fell away from Geder. He took a long drink of beer, hiding behind the glass, and tried to think how to ask what the pair were talking about without seeming obvious. Before he could come up with something clever, Broot spoke up.

"You talking about the letter from Ternigan?"

"Jorey Kalliam's father is seeing the whole thing from back home, but I can't pry details out with a crowbar."

Geder cleared his throat.

"Ternigan wrote a letter?" he said, his voice higher and more strained than he'd meant it to be. Tilliakin laughed.

"Half a book, the way I heard it," he said. "The war chests Klin's

been sending home were a little light for some people's tastes. Ternigan wants to know why. The way I heard it, he's sending in one of his men to look over Klin's books, see if he's been taking more than his share."

"That's not happening," Jorey said. "At least it isn't happening yet."

Broot's eyebrows rose.

"So you *have* heard something," Tilliakin said. "I knew you were holding out."

Jorey smiled ruefully.

"I don't know anything certain. Father said that there's been some concern at court that the Vanai campaign hasn't done as well for the crown as expected. It's all grumbling in the court so far. The king hasn't said anything against the way Klin's managed things."

"Hasn't said anything *for* him either, though, has he?" Tilliakin asked.

"No," Jorey said. "No, he hasn't."

"Ternigan won't recall him," Broot said around a mouthful of sausage. "They'd both look bad."

"If he does, though, he'll do it quick. Be interesting to know who he'd put in his place, wouldn't it?" Tilliakin said, staring pointedly at Jorey.

Geder looked back and forth between the men, his mind bounding on ahead of him like a dog that has slipped its leash. Klin's steady stream of taxation demands suddenly took on more significance. Perhaps he wasn't only finding unpleasant tasks to occupy Geder's days. Those coins might be going back to Camnipol in place of the ones lost when the caravan vanished away. Klin buying back the court's good opinion.

The thought was too sweet to trust. Because if it was true, if *he* had put Sir Alan Klin in the bad graces of the king…

"I think Jorey would make a fine prince for Vanai," Geder said.

"God's wounds, Palliako!" Broot said. "Don't say that kind of thing where people can hear you!"

"Sorry," Geder said. "I only meant—"

A roar came from the high table. Half a dozen jugglers dressed in fool's costumes were tossing knives back and forth through the air, blades catching the firelight. The occupants of the high table had shifted, making room for the show, and Geder could see Alan Klin clearly now. Through the flurry of knives, he imagined there was an uneasiness about the man's shoulders. A false cheerfulness in his smiles and laughter. A haunted look to the bright eyes. And if it was true, then he—Geder Palliako—had put them there. And what was more, Klin would never know. Never follow back the ripples.

Geder laughed and clapped and pretended he was watching the

performance.

Cithrin

After the night skating on the mill pond and the throat-closing fear of the day that came after, her nights took on a pattern. First, bone-deep exhaustion. Then, after she curled into the wool, a glorious hour of rest before her eyes popped open, her mind racing, her heart tight and nervous. Some nights, she would see the doughy Antean nobleman finding the hidden chests again, only this time he shouted out, and his soldiers came. Her mind spun through nightmare images of what had almost been. Sandr killed. Opal slaughtered. Master Kit riddled with arrows, his blood bright on the snow. Marcus Wester handing her over to the soldiers in exchange for the caravan's safe passage. And then what the soldiers might have done to her. That it hadn't happened gave the fear an almost spiritual power, as if her near escape had incurred a debt whose payment might be heavier than she could bear.

She fought back with memories of Magister Imaniel, the bank, the balances of trade and insurance, intrigue and subtle design that reminded her of home. It didn't bring rest, but it made the cold, dark, wakeful hours bearable, letting her pretend the world followed rules and could be tamed. Then the eastern sky would brighten, and the exhaustion would fall over her like a worked-metal coat, and she'd force herself up, out, and through another impossible day. By the time they reached Porte Oliva, she was living half in a waking dream. Small red animals shifted and danced in the corner of her vision, and the most improbable ideas—she had to swallow all the books to keep them safe, Master Kit could grow wings but didn't want anyone to know, Cary secretly planned to kill her in a jealous rage over Sandr—took on a plausibility they hadn't earned.

Everything she knew of Porte Oliva, she knew at second hand. She knew it sat at Birancour's southern edge and survived on what trade from the east didn't stop at the Free Cities and what from the west made the extra journey to avoid the pirates haunting Cabral. The greatest part of its wealth came as a wayport between Lyoneia and Narinisle. Magister Imaniel had called it everybody's second choice, but he'd said it as if that might not be such a bad role to play. She'd imagined it as a city of rough edges and local prides.

Her arrival itself had been uncanny. She remembered driving her team along hilly, snow-blown roads, and then a Kurtadam boy, sleek as an otter, trotted alongside her cart, his hand outstretched, asking her for coins, and a forest of buildings had sprouted around her. Porte

Oliva was the first real city she'd seen apart from Vanai, stone where Vanai was wood, salt where Vanai was freshwater. Her first impressions of it were a blur of narrow streets with high white arches, the smells of shit and sea salt, the voices of full-blooded Cinnae chattering like finches. She thought they'd passed through a tunnel in a great wall, like the old stories of dead men passing from one life to another, but it was just as likely she'd dreamed it.

She remembered nothing about how she'd hired Marcus Wester and his second as her personal guard. Not even why she'd thought it was a good idea.

The captain padded across the stone floor. From the cot against the wall, Yardem Hane snored. Cithrin let herself swim up from her nap and survey the dank little rooms again for the hundredth time. A small fire in the grate muttered, casting red-and-orange shadows on the far wall and belching pine smoke into the air. The window was scraped parchment, and it dirtied what sunlight it let in. The boxes—contents of the cart she'd carried so carefully from Vanai—were stacked along the walls like any cheap warehouse. Only the most valuable of the cart's contents had been put in the sunken iron strongbox. Hardly a tenth of what they carried would fit. Cithrin sat up. Her body felt bruised, but her head was almost clear.

"Morning," Marcus Wester said, nodding politely.

"How long was I asleep?" she asked.

"Half the morning. It's not midday yet."

"Is there any food?"

"Some sausage from last night," he said, nodding toward the small door of warped wood that led to the only other room.

Cithrin rose. For years in her life, half a morning's sleep would have been barely enough to see her through to evening. Now it felt like a luxury. The back room had neither door nor window, so Cithrin lit a thumb-sized stub of candle and carried it back with her. The books, soul and memory of the Vanai bank, hunkered on a wooden palette. A rough oak table supported a carafe of water and a length of greyish sausage. The overwhelming stink came from a tin chamberpot in the corner. Cithrin relieved herself, throwing a double handful of ashes in before putting the lid back in place. She cut a length of sausage and leaned against the table, chewing it. Apple and garlic seasoned the meat. It wasn't nearly as bad as she'd expected.

For almost two weeks, her life had been this. Marcus watched the day, Yardem the night. They ventured outside as little as possible. The only privacy was in the smaller room, and the only light came from the dim window, the fire grate, and a few candles. The supplies were bought with the captain's money. What he'd earned selling the wool, cart, and mules was in a small leather purse by the door to the street.

They'd taken less money for the mules than they could have gotten, but Cithrin thought the Firstblood woman who'd taken them in the end would treat them best.

She missed the mules.

Her hair felt greasy and lank. Her only clothes were the ones she'd been given when she became Tag the Carter. She finished the sausage and walked back out.

"I need clothes," she said. "I'm not wearing this until spring."

"All right," the captain said. "Only don't go far until you know the streets. And don't call attention to yourself. The fewer people realize we're here, the safer we are."

It was what he said every time, as if she would have forgotten since the day before. The Tralgu shifted in his sleep and sighed. She took the purse, tucked it in her pocket, and opened the door. The daylight was like a flood.

"Cithrin!"

She turned back. The captain was squatting by the fire, stirring the ashes with a blade, but his eyes were on her and full of concern.

"Be careful out there," he said.

"I know the stakes," she said, and stepped into the street.

The salt district was a maze. Buildings two stories high leaned over streets so narrow people couldn't pass without touching. The curve of the land shaped everything, making it impossible to see very far in any direction, and intersections that seemed to promise a wider path were as likely to end blind. Voices of men and women, Kurtadam, Cinnae, and Firstblood, filled the air. If a man shouted at his wife in this district, the echoes would carry the melody of his anger even as it washed away his individual words.

Children lurked in the windows and doorways, feral as cats. A few days' warm weather had melted the filthy snow and left black puddles lurking in the corners, covered with thin skins of ice. There might have been a thousand paths in and out, but Cithrin knew one, and she kept to it. A few minutes' walk and there was a five-way intersection with one pathway leading northeast. A wider swath of white-hazed sky glowed above it, and Cithrin followed it toward the market, the docks, and the flow of money that kept Porte Oliva alive.

The Grand Market wasn't an open square, but a network of covered walks. The rough cobbles of the street gave way to pale tiles. The archways sloped up like hands in folded prayer, great pale windows spilling light down between the stone and iron fingers. Men and women sang and played flutes. Pupeteers played through their little dramas, changed slightly to include a local merchant or political figure in the story. Servants from the great houses and palaces pushed along, enormous wicker baskets on their heads, to supply the dinners

of the powerful. The small independent moneylenders—small fish compared to the leviathan of the Medean bank—set up their green felt boards and beam balances. Travelers and sailors came up from the docks to admire the chaos. Merchants called out their wares: bread and fish and meat, cloth and spice and spiritual guidance and never two days in the same configuration.

Every morning before the first light of dawn, merchants lined up at great kiosks waiting for the queensmen to arrive, escorting ornate iron chests from the governor's palace. Each merchant paid a fee and drew a ticket from the chest saying which of the thousands of alcoves and intersections would be theirs for the day. No moneylender, butcher, baker, or farmer could rely on making his fortune by holding a particular space. Or so it would be if the system weren't rigged. Cithrin had only been twice, but she doubted anything so carefully designed to give the appearance of fairness could keep from corruption.

She bought herself a burlap pocket of fire-warmed raisins and honey nuts, preparing herself for the search, but it wasn't long before she found the dressmaker she'd been hoping for, and only five alcoves from where she'd seen him last. The proprietor was a full-blood Cinnae man, thin and tall and pale, with rings on every finger and teeth that looked as if they'd been filed sharp. He had five tables arranged in a half circle with a sixth in the middle with his best wares on display. Cithrin paused, looking up at three dresses as if she were only passing time. The Cinnae stood at the side, shouting at a Firstblood woman who had her arms crossed and her face set in an almost godlike scowl. A crate lay between them, the pale wood soaked dark.

"Look! Look what the water's done to the dye!" the merchant said.

"I didn't drop them off the boat," the woman said.

"Neither did I."

"You signed papers for ten dresses. Here's ten dresses."

"I signed for ten dresses I could sell!"

Cithrin stepped closer. From what she could see, the dresses were simply cut. The seawater had run the dyes, yellow into blue into pale pink, and stippled all with spots of white like a handful of scattered sand. The Cinnae shot a look at her, annoyance narrowing his eyes.

"You need something?"

"A dress," Cithrin said around a mouthful of raisins. The merchant looked at her skeptically. Cithrin took her purse from her pocket and opened it. The silver caught the sunlight, and the merchant shrugged.

"Let me show you what we have," he said, turning away from the still-fuming Firstblood woman. From the center table, he took the first dress. Blue and white with embroidered sleeves, it seemed to breathe

lavender petals. The merchant smoothed the cloth.

"This is our finest piece," he said. "Expensive, yes, but worth every coin. For a hundred and twenty silver, you won't find a better garment anywhere in the market. And that includes recutting it for your frame, of course."

Cithrin shook her head.

"That's not the one you sell," she said.

The merchant, replacing the dress on its stand, paused. Her phrase had struck him.

"You don't sell that one," Cithrin repeated. "It's not there to be sold. It's to make the next one seem reasonable. You offer the rose-colored one next? If you're starting at a hundred and twenty, you'll price it at… What? Eighty?"

"Eighty-five," the Cinnae said sourly.

"Which is too much," Cithrin said. "But I'll give you forty-five. That covers your cost and gives you a little profit."

"Forty-*five*?"

"It's a fair price," Cithrin said, taking another handful of raisins.

The merchant's jaw hung open an inch. The Firstblood woman beside the crate chuckled. Cithrin felt a sudden warmth in her belly, a release like the first drink of strong wine. She smiled, and for the first time in days, it came easily.

"If you give it to me for forty," Cithrin said, nodding at the ruined dresses, "I'll help you turn a profit on those."

The merchant stepped back, his arms crossed in front of him. Cithrin feared she'd overplayed him until he spoke.

"How would you propose that?" he said. His words had a touch of amusement.

"Forty," she said.

"Convince me."

Cithrin walked back to the crate and rifled through the dresses. They were all the same design. Cheap cloth with tin hooks and thread eyes, a bit of embroidery at the sleeve and collar.

"Where do you see the fewest goods from?" she asked. "Hallskar?"

"We don't see much from there," the merchant agreed.

"So switch out these hooks for silver," Cithrin said. "And put glass beads here at the collars. Three or four, but bright. Something to catch the eye."

"Why would I waste good silver and beads on trash like this?"

"You wouldn't," Cithrin said. "That's the point. If they have silver and beads, they must not be trash. Call them… I don't know. Hallskari salt dyes. New process, very rare. No other dresses like them in the Grand Market. Start them at two hundred silver, drop down to one hundred thirty."

“Why would anyone agree to pay that?”

“Why wouldn’t they? When it’s a new thing, no one knows its fair price. If nobody knows better, you can do anything.”

The merchant shook his head, but it wasn’t refusal. The Firstblood woman’s eyebrows crawled toward her hairline. Cithrin dug out a honeyed nut. The roar and echo of voices around them was as good as silence. Cithrin waited for the space of four breaths as the merchant wrestled in his mind.

“If only one person in the whole Grand Market believed it,” Cithrin said, “you’d cover the cost of all ten dresses. Hooks, beads, and everything. If *two* people did…”

The merchant was quiet for two breaths more.

“You know entirely too much about dresses,” he said.

I don’t know anything *about dresses,* she thought. The merchant barked out a laugh. He reached for the rose dress and tossed it at Cithrin in mock disgust.

“Forty,” he said to her, then turned to the Firstblood woman. “Do you see this? Look at this face. That is a truly dangerous woman.”

“I believe you,” the Firstblood said as Cithrin, grinning, counted out coins.

An hour later, she was walking down the half-open ways of the Grand Market, her dress folded in a tight, rose-colored bundle under one arm, and the world around her a bright, benign place. The dress would need altering to make it fit her body, but that was a minor point. More than any object she’d gained, she enjoyed the idea of being *a truly dangerous woman.*

The sun had only just begun its slide into the west. Cithrin took herself toward the public baths, thinking of an hour’s time in warm water and steam. Maybe even a few coins spent on a balm to drive away the fleas and lice that travel and her new, tiny rooms had given her. The baths sat at the northern edge of a wide public square. Pillars rose into the air, tall as trees, though whatever shelter they’d supported had been gone long enough that the rain had worn channels in the supports. Patches of brown, winter-killed grass lay like carpets in the open spaces, and twig-fingered bushes caught dead leaves and scraps of cloth. Cithrin walked past a cart selling hot soup and a weedy Kurtadam with a pair of marionettes dancing at his feet beside a beggar’s bowl with a few bronze coins. Across the square, a troupe of players had changed their cart to a stage, edging out a pair of disgruntled puppeteers. Pigeons wheeled overhead. A group of Cinnae women walked together, pale and thin and lovely, their dresses flowing around their bodies like seaweed in the tide, and their voices all accents and music. Cithrin wanted to watch them, but without being seen. She’d never known a full-blooded Cinnae well. And yet her

mother had been one, would have looked in place as part of just such a group.

The women turned up the wide steps that led to the baths, and Cithrin had started to follow when a familiar voice caught her up short.

"Stop!"

She turned.

"Stop now, and come near. Hear the tale of Aleren Mankiller and the Sword of Dragons! Or if you are faint of heart, move on."

On the players' stage, an older man strode across the planks, his voice ringing through the square. His beard jutted out, and his hair had been combed high. He wore gaudy theatrical robes, and his voice rang and slithered among the great pillars. There was no mistaking Master Kit, the cunning man. Cithrin walked toward the stage, wondering whether she was dreaming. Half a dozen other citizens of Porte Oliva had paused, drawn in by the patter, and the crowd itself drew a crowd. Cithrin stood on a patch of dead grass, amazed. Opal stepped out wearing a robe that made her seem ten years younger. Then Smit, wearing a simple laborer's cap and speaking in a broad Northcoast accent. Then Hornet in gilt armor, and behind him, striding onto the boards as if he owned the world and everything in it, Sandr. Cithrin laughed with delight, and other hands joined in her clapping. Mikel and Cary, both in among the crowd, nodded to her. Catching Cary's gaze, Cithrin pantomimed a drawing a sword and then gestured at the stage. *I thought you were soldiers, and you were this?* Cary shifted her head coyly and dropped a tiny curtsey before returning to the work of cheering Aleren Mankiller and hissing Orcus the Demon King.

The winter square was too cold. By the end of the first act, Cithrin's ears ached and her nose ran. She wrapped her arms around herself, huddling into her clothes, but nothing could have pulled her away. The story unfolded like a spring flower blooming, the caravan guards she'd known for months becoming actors before her, the actors becoming the parts they played until in the end Aleren Mankiller thrust the poisoned sword into the the belly of Orcus, Sandr and Master Kit half-forgotten echoes of men she used to know. The applause from the crowd was thin but heartfelt, and Cithrin dug out a few coins of her own to add to the shower dancing on the boards.

As the actors broke down the stage, Opal, Mikel, and Smit came out to grin at her and trade stories. Yes, they'd been actors from the start. They'd only played at being guards. Cary recited the opening of the comic piece they were making to commemorate the adventure. Cithrin told them—quietly so as not be overheard—about her rooms with Marcus and Yardem, and Opal made lewd jokes until Smit started to

blush and they all lost track of themselves in laughing.

Sandr stood near the cart, frowning furiously and pointedly not looking at them all. Cithrin excused herself from the others and went to him, thinking that he might have been hurt that she was talking to the others and not to him.

"Imagine this," she said. "You never told me."

"Suppose not," Sandr said. He didn't meet her eyes.

"I didn't know," she said. "You were brilliant."

"Thank you."

Master Kit called from the far side of the cart, and Sandr hauled on a thick rope, pulling the stage up to lean against the cart's frame. Sandr tied off the rope, flickered his eyes to Cithrin and away, and nodded.

"I'm not done working. I need to go."

Cithrin stepped back, the pleasure in her heart going hollow.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to—"

"S'allright," Sandr said. "I just…"

Shaking his head, he walked away, ducking under a spar that Smit was bringing down to pack. Cithrin walked back into the square. The milk-colored sky seemed less benign than before. She didn't know whether to approach the players again or walk away, whether she was welcome here or an intrusion. She found herself suddenly aware of her tattered clothes and slept-on hair.

"It isn't you," a woman's voice said. Cary had looped around behind her. Cary, who'd demanded that Yardem tell her which weapon gave a woman advantage. Cary, who'd slung a bow over her shoulder and looked like a veteran of a dozen wars. Cary, who Cithrin didn't actually know.

"What isn't me?" she said.

"Sandr," Cary said, nodding toward a place down the square. "He's the new leading man. Leading men are always pigs for the first few years."

Sandr stood there, smiling. Three girls in rough clothes stood around him. One touched his arm, her fingers flickering on him like a butterfly unsure whether it was safe to land. Cithrin watched him smile at the girl, watched him glance down at her breasts.

"All I'm saying is, it's nothing to do with you," Cary said.

"I don't care," Cithrin said. "It's not as if I cared about him. But I didn't know that… I mean, I thought…"

"We all think that, the first few times," Cary said. "For what it draws, I'm sorry, and I promise I'll put sand in his beer in your name."

Cithrin forced herself to laugh. She didn't know when the knot had come back into her stomach, but it was there now.

"Nothing on my account," she said. "He's just what he is."

“Wise words, sister mine,” Cary said. “Do you want to come out with us? We’re trying another show outside the governor’s palace at dusk.”

“No,” Cithrin said, too sharply. She tried again. “No, I was just going to the baths and then back to my rooms. Before the captain gets nervous.”

“Luck with that. I think he was born nervous. Or watchful, at least,” Cary said. “It was good seeing you.”

Cithrin turned and walked up the broad steps. Steam billowed out of the bathhouse doors. Voices in argument and in song. Cithrin turned aside, walking past it all. Her jaw hurt, and she made herself unclench it. Part of her wanted to turn back, to go see who Sandr was talking with, whether he’d look her way. Maybe if…

Grit in the chilly air made her eyes water, and she wiped the tears away with the back of her hand. On the way home, she stopped at a public house and drank a mug of the same kind of fortified wine Sandr had brought her that day by the mill pond.

It didn’t taste as good.

All well?” Captain Wester snapped as she came in. “You were gone a long time.”

“Fine,” she said shortly. “Everything’s fine.”

Dawson

Dawson Kalliam found Kavinpol ugly. The city squatted with one leg on either side of the river Uder, its buildings stuccoed a scabrous red-grey. The local food founded itself on onions and fish pulled from the same water into which the sewers emptied. Too many cycles of freeze and thaw cracked the streets, leaving pools of half-frozen mud to break the leg of an unwary horse. And in the center of it all, Lord Ternigan's estate with hunting grounds walled away from the city like a glorified lawn garden. In any other year, Dawson would have stayed on his estate with Clara and whichever of his sons chose to winter there rather than follow the hunt here.

This winter, though, the hunt had taken on a different meaning. Ternigan's tame deer and hand-raised quail weren't the prize Dawson tracked. And private audiences with the king were much easier to arrange when it was the king who wanted them.

"God *damn* it, Kalliam. I'm trying to keep peace, and you're killing people in the streets?"

The ceiling of the king's chamber vaulted up into the soot-muddied dimness above them. Great windows looked out over the city, boasts made of glass and iron. Overstated and gaudy, the architecture spoke of glory and power, and what it said was: *You may have these or comfort, but not both.*

Dawson looked at his childhood friend. The months of winter had etched a frown into the corners of his mouth and left grey at his temples like the first frost. Or perhaps the signs of age and weakness had always been there, and Dawson hadn't been willing to see them until now. The jewel-studded robes that Simeon wore—even the crown itself—looked less like the raiments of power and greatness than they had in the autumn. Instead, they were the empty form of it, like a dry pitcher waiting to be filled. Dawson knew the response that Simeon and etiquette expected. *Forgive me, sire.*

"Nobler blood's spilled in Camnipol every time someone slaughters a pig," Dawson said. "They were Issandrian's thugs."

"You have proof of that?"

"Of course I can't prove it, but we both know they were. His or Maas's, it hardly matters. And you wouldn't be pulling my leash if you believed they were street toughs with poor aim."

The pause weighted the air. Simeon rose. His boots scraped against the stone floor. Around them, the chamber's tapestries shifted, and the

king's guard kept their silent watch. Dawson wished they could be truly alone. The guards were servants, but they were also men.

"Your Majesty," Dawson said, "I think you fail to understand the loyalty all around you. My own included. I have spent the season having private conversations with the highest-born men in Antea, and there is a wide support for you against Issandrian and his pack."

"Issandrian and his pack are also my subjects," Simeon said. "I can make the argument that feeding unrest is in itself acting against me."

"We are acting *for* you, Simeon. The men I have spoken with are united in *your* name. I only wish you were with us."

"If I start declaring war on parts of the nobility only because they happen to be in ascendance at the moment—"

"Is that what you've heard me say? Simeon, I have spent months cajoling and promising everyone I could find with any influence on Ternigan. He is ready to pull Klin from Vanai. All he needs is a signal from you."

"If I take sides in this, it will end in blood."

"And if you don't the kingdom will have unending peace and light? You know better than that."

"The dragons—"

"The dragons didn't fall because there was a war. There was a war because there wasn't a leader. A family needs a father, and a kingdom needs a king. It is your duty to lead, and if you fail in that, the day will come when they follow someone else. *Then* we will be on the dragon's path."

Simeon shook his head. The firelight reflected in his eyes. Outside, a cold wind whirled, smelling of winter. Snow like a fall of ashes whirled past the windows.

"A family needs a father," the king said, as if the words were funny and bitter both. "When Eleora died, I promised her I'd take care of our son. Not the prince, our son."

"Aster *is* the prince," Dawson said.

"If he weren't, he would still be my son. You have children. You understand."

"I have three sons and a daughter. Barriath captains a ship under Lord Skestinin, Vicarian is studying for the priesthood, and Jorey's in Vanai. Elisia married Lord Annerin's eldest son three years ago, and I've barely heard of her since. And none of them, Simeon, have made me *timid,*" Dawson said. And then, more softly, "What happened to you?"

Simeon laughed.

"I became king. It's all well and good when we were playing at it in the yards and on the battlefields, but then Father died. It wasn't play anymore. Issandrian's cabal isn't my only problem. Hallskar's begun

harboring raiders again. Northcoast's aiming for another war of succession and Asterilhold's backing both sides. The tax revenues from Estinford aren't what they should be, so someone's either stealing them or the farms are starting to fail. And in a few years, Aster's to step up and run it all."

"Not so few," Dawson said. "We're not young, but we've got life in us yet. And you know the answer to this as well as I do. Find men you trust, and then trust them."

"Meaning you and your cabal instead of Issandrian and his?" the king asked dryly.

"Yes. Meaning that."

"I'd rather you backed away. Let Issandiran's movement collapse from within."

"It won't."

King Simeon looked up, and his eyes might have held anger or amusement or despair. Dawson sank deliberately to his knee, a man giving obeisance to his king. The angle of his chin and his shoulders made it a challenge. *Here is my loyalty. Deserve it.*

"You should go, old friend," the king said. "I need to rest before the feast. I need to think."

Dawson rose, bowed silently, and left for his own rooms. Lord Ternigan's estate sprawled. It had been built over the course of centuries by uncountable designers, each it seemed with his own conflicting vision. The result was a labyrinth. Every courtyard and square opened in some unexpected way, hallways angled and turned to avoid obstacles long since unmade. There was no better invitation for a quiet knife from the shadows.

He let the king's servant put him into his coat, drape the thick black wool cloak across his shoulders, and bow before stepping out into the white wind. Vincen Coe stepped behind him. Dawson didn't speak to the man, and the hunter offered no report. With only the creak of leather and their snow-muffled footsteps, they crossed the courtyard, passed through a series of overhung walkways, and across a wide, flat bridge where the wind threatened to whip them away like sparrows in a storm. There were warmer paths, but they were better peopled, and so more dangerous. If Issandrian and Maas wanted to strike at Dawson, they'd have to work for it.

The hospitality that Ternigan had offered House Kalliam included a private house that had once belonged to a king's favored concubine. The stonework had a vulgar sensuality, the gardens before it—no doubt lush in spring—were now hardly more than a collection of twigs and dead scrub. But it was defensible, and Dawson appreciated it for that. He shrugged off his cloak and his bodyguard at the door and entered the warm, dark inner rooms to the smell of mint tea and

the sound of a woman weeping.

For a horrible moment, he thought the voice was Clara's, but the years had trained him to pick her sounds out from any others, and these sobs were not hers. Quietly, he tracked the weeping and, as he drew nearer, Clara's soothing voice to a sitting chamber where the long-dead concubine had once taken her ease. Now Clara sat there on a low divan, her cousin Phelia—Baroness of Ebbinbaugh and wife of the hated Feldin Maas—sitting on the floor before her, her head resting in Clara's lap. Dawson met his wife's gaze, and Clara shook her head without a pause in her soft litany of comfort. Dawson stepped back. He went to the private study to smoke his pipe, drink whiskey, and work on a poem he'd started composing until Clara came, an hour later, and dropped herself unceremoniously into his lap.

"Poor Phelia," she sighed.

"Domestic trouble?" Dawson asked, stroking his wife's hair. She plucked the pipe from his mouth and drew a deep lungful herself.

"It seems my husband is making her husband terribly unhappy," she said.

"Her husband is trying to kill yours."

"I know, but it hardly seems polite to point it out when the poor thing's broken down in front of me. Besides which, you're winning, aren't you? I can hardly see her asking mercy if the warm winds were blowing on Ebbinbaugh."

"Asking mercy was she?"

"Not in so many words," Clara said, relinquishing Dawson's lap but not his pipe. "But she wouldn't, would she? Terribly rude, and I'm fairly certain Feldin didn't know she'd come, so don't start figuring her into all your calculations and intrigues. Sometimes a frightened woman is only a frightened woman."

"And still, I don't plan to make her days any better," Dawson said. Clara shrugged and looked away. When he spoke next his tone was less playful. "I'm sorry about it. For you and for her. If that helps."

For a long moment, Clara was silent, sipping smoke from his pipe. In the dim light, she looked younger than she was.

"Our worlds are growing apart, husband," Clara said. "Yours and mine. Your little wars, my peaces. War is winning out."

"There's a time for war," Dawson said.

"I suppose," she said. "I… suppose. Still, remember that wars end. Try to be sure that there's something worth having at the other end. Not all your enemies are your enemies."

"That's nonsense, love."

"No it isn't," she said. "It's just not how you see the world. Phelia's no part of whatever you and Feldin hate in each other any more than I am. But she's at stake, as am I and our children. Phelia is your enemy

because she has to be, not because she chose it. And when the end comes, remember that a great number of the people on the other side have lost a great deal and didn't pick the fight."

"Would you have me stop?" he asked.

Clara laughed, a deep, purring sound. The smoke rose from her mouth, curling in the candlelight.

"Shall I ask the sun not to set while I'm at it?"

"For you, I would," Dawson said.

"For me, you would try, and you'd batter yourself to nothing in the attempt," she said. "No, do what you think needs doing. And think about how you would want Feldin to treat me, if he won."

Dawson bowed his head. Around them, the beams and stones settled in the winter cold, popping and muttering to themselves. When he looked up again, her gaze was on him.

"I will try," he said. "And if I forget…?"

"I'll remind you, love," Clara said. "It's what I do."

The feast that night began an hour before sunset and was to last until all the candles had burned themselves out. Lord Ternigan sat at the high table with his wife and brother. Simeon sat at the far end, Aster beside him in red velvet and cloth-of-gold looking embarrassed whenever Lady Ternigan spoke to him. The rider who'd taken top honors in the hunt—the half-Jasuru son of a noble family from Sarakal who was traveling in Antea for God knew what reason—joined them, nodding at everything and contributing nothing.

The best tapestries of Ternigan's collection hung on the walls, beeswax candles burned in holders of sculpted crystal, and the dogs that lurked around the tables wore cloths on their backs in the colors of every noble house in Antea as a bit of levity to brighten the night. Dawson sat at the second table, near enough to hear what was said, and at the far end of the table with only five people between them, Feldin Maas. Ternigan once again evenhandedly marking that his allegiance was negotiable as a whore's virtue. Phelia Maas sat her husband's side stealing watery glances at Dawson. He ate his soup. It had too much salt, not enough lemon, and the fish still had bones in it.

"Lovely soup," Clara said. "I remember my aunt—not your mother, Phelia, dear, Aunt Estrir who married that awful fop from Birancour—saying that the best thing for river fish is lemon zest."

"I remember her," Phelia said, clutching at the connection almost desperately. "She came back for my wedding, and she affected that terrible accent."

Clara laughed, and for a moment things might almost have been at

ease.

Behind Dawson, King Simeon cleared his throat. Dawson couldn't say what about the sound caught him, but the hair on the back of his neck rose. From the pinched, bloodless lips and the wineglass trapped halfway between table and mouth, it was clear Feldin Maas had heard it too.

"All of this is tribute from your man in Vanai?" Simeon asked with a forced casualness.

"No, Majesty. Most has been in my family for years."

"Ah, good. That squares better with what I'd heard about Klin and his taxes. For a moment, I thought you'd been holding out on me."

Maas's face went pale. He lowered the wineglass to the table. Dawson took a bite of fish and decided that perhaps Clara was right. The lemon did add something to it. King Simeon had just joked that Klin's gifts from the conquered city wouldn't be enough to decorate a feast. The tone was light, the only response was laughter, and Sir Alan Klin would be back in Antea by the thaw.

"I hope you'll excuse me," Dawson said. "Nature."

"We understand," Feldin Maas said, biting the words. "Every bladder gets weak with age."

Dawson spread his hands in a gesture that could be read as an acknowledgment of the jest or as a provocation. *Do your worst, little man. Do your worst.*

By the time Dawson reached the edge of the feasting hall, Coe was silently walking behind him. In the wide stone hallway that led to the private retiring rooms, Dawson stopped and Coe stopped with him. It wasn't long before Canl Daskellin, Baron of Watermarch, appeared, silhouetted by the light from the feast.

"Well," Daskellin said.

"Yes," Dawson said.

"Come with me," Daskellin said. Together the two men walked to a private retiring room. Coe didn't remain behind, but he gave a greater distance between himself and his betters. Dawson wondered what would happen if he ordered Coe away. On one hand, the huntsman could hardly refuse. On the other, strictly speaking, Coe answered to Clara. Awkward position for the man. Dawson's mischievous spirit was tempted to try it and see which way the huntsman jumped, but Canl Daskellin spoke and brought his mind back to other matters.

"I've managed to catch Ternigan's ear. His loyalty's with us."

"Until the tide turns," Dawson said.

"Yes, and so we need to act quickly. I believe we can call the candidate for Klin's replacement. But…"

"I know."

"I've spoken with our friends in Camnipol. Count Hiren would have

been the consensus choice if he'd lived."

"Issandrian's cousin? What did they like about him," Dawson said.

"Estranged cousin," Daskellin said. "But dead cousin in any case. His greatest strength was that he had no love for Issandrian and no direct ties to any of us."

Dawson spat.

"How is it we've come so quickly to the place where we don't want to seat one of our enemies *or* one of our own."

"It's the danger of conspiracy," Daskellin said. "Breeds a certain distrust."

Dawson crossed his arms. In his heart, he wanted his son Jorey in the prince's chair. He could rely on his own blood in a way that mere politics could never attain. Which was, of course, why he'd sworn against it. Vanai had to be denied to Issandrian. But it couldn't be taken by any single member of Dawson's still-fresh alliance without threatening its fracture. Dawson had foreseen the problem. He had his proposal ready.

"Hear me out, Canl. Vanai was always a small piece in this," Dawson said carefully.

"True."

"With Klin gone, Issandrian's lost the tribute, but the city is still his project. Maas agitated for taking it. Klin fought for it, and even controlled the city until now. If we don't put someone in power who is identified with us, it will remain Issandrian's in the general opinion."

"But who of ours can we put in?"

"No one," Dawson said, "that's what I mean. We can't take it from Issandrian in the mind of the court. But now we can control what it says about him. What if the governance of the city were to become a catastrophe? Lose the city to incompetence, and Issandrian's reputation suffers along with it."

Daskellin stopped. Between the dimness of the light spilling from the feast chamber and the darkness of the man's complexion, Dawson couldn't read his expression. He pressed on.

"My youngest son is there," Dawson said. "He's been sending reports. Lerer Palliako's son is in Vanai. Geder, his name is. Klin's been using him to do the unpopular work. No one likes or respects him."

"Why not? Is he dim?"

"Worse than dim, one of those men who *only* knows what he's read in books. He's the kind that reads an account of a sailing voyage and thinks he's a captain."

"And you want Ternigan to name Geder Palliako in Klin's place?"

"If half of what I've heard is true," Dawson said with a smile, "there's no one better suited to lose Vanai."

Marcus

Night in the salt district of Porte Oliva wasn't quiet. Even in the deep night when no moon lit the street, there were sounds. Voices lifted in song or anger, the scuttling and complaints of feral cats. And, in the rooms he and Yardem had hired, the slow, regular breath of the girl, sleeping at last. Marcus had come to know the difference between the way she inhaled when she was sleeping and when she was only willing herself to. It was an intimacy he never spoke of.

Yardem squatted on the floor by the glowing embers of the fire, ears forward, eyes focused on nothing. Marcus had seen the Tralgu sit through whole nights like that; motionless, waiting, aware without insisting upon awareness. Yardem never fell asleep on watch, and he never struggled to rest when he was off duty. Marcus, blanket-wrapped and sleepless, envied him that.

The cold of winter was still on the city, but it wouldn't be many more weeks before the sea lanes opened. A ship from Porte Oliva to Carse would be faster than going overland through Birancour. And as long as he could keep it from captain and crew what exactly they were hauling—

The scraping sound was soft, there and gone again in an eyeblink. Leather sole against stone. Yardem sat up a degree straighter. He looked over at Marcus, then pointed once toward the opaque parchment window, and then at the door. Marcus nodded and rolled slowly off the cot, careful not to let the canvas creak beneath him. He took a slow step toward the window as Yardem shifted toward the door. When Marcus drew his knife, he kept his left thumb against the steel to keep it from singing when it cleared the scabbard. Cithrin snored delicately behind him.

Whoever they were, they'd done this before. The door burst open at the same instant a man leaped through the parchment window. Marcus kicked low, his boot slamming against the man's knee. While the man struggled to regain his balance, Marcus slit his throat, and two more men poured in after him. They had daggers. Swords would have been awkward in so small a space. Marcus had hoped they'd have swords.

Yardem grunted the way he did when he lifted something too heavy, and an unfamiliar voice cried out in pain. The knife man on Marcus's left made a flurry of short swings designed to catch his eye and force him back while the one on the right shifted to flank him.

They were thickly built, but not massive. Firstblood or Jasuru rather than Yemmu or Haavirkin. Marcus ignored the false attack, feinting instead to keep the man on his right from getting around him. The first man took the opening and slid his blade in. Marcus felt the pain bloom on his ribs, but he ignored it. Behind him, a bone snapped, but no one screamed.

"We surrender," Marcus said, and slid forward, his ankle hooking behind the rightmost attacker's leg. When he brought his knife out, the man instinctively stepped back, stumbling. Marcus sank his blade in the man's groin, but the effort left him open again. The remaining attacker, having drawn blood once, swooped in for the kill. Marcus twisted, the enemy blade skittering across his shoulder. Marcus dropped his own knife and took a grip on the other man's elbow, but the attacker moved in close, bending Marcus back with a combination of weight and leverage. The hot breath stank of beer and fish. The embers glittered on scaled skin and evil, pointed teeth. Jasuru, then. Marcus felt the tip of the Jasuru's blade prick his belly. Another push and the knife would open him like a trout.

"Yardem?" Marcus grunted.

"Sir?" Yardem said, and then, "Oh. Sorry."

A dagger sprouted from the Jasuru's left eye, the blood sheeting down from the wound, black in the monochrome dimness. The attacker pressed forward even as he died, but Marcus felt the strength leave the man and stepped back to let the body fall.

Three men lay by the torn window, dead or bleeding dry. Another lay motionless on the floor, one arm sprawled into the fire grate and starting to burn, and the last slumped against the wall at Yardem's feet, head at an improbable angle. Five men. Strong and experienced. This, Marcus thought, was very, *very* bad.

"What's the matter?" Cithrin asked groggily. "Did something happen?"

"Outside," Yardem said, and Marcus heard it too. Retreating footsteps.

"Stay here," Marcus said, and bolted out the ruined window.

The night-black streets blinded him, but he loped forward, committing to each stride and hoping that his foot didn't come down on any icy puddle or unexpected step. Ahead of him, the footsteps slapped against cobbles. Something large and animal hissed as Marcus flew past. His lungs burned, and the blood on his shoulder and side chilled him. The fleeing footsteps skittered, lost balance, and pelted off toward the left. He was getting closer.

The street opened onto a wider square, and there, by starlight, Marcus caught sight of the fleeing figure. It was small and wrapped in a dark cloak with a hood that covered head and hair. The disguise was

pointless. By the time he'd seen the fleeing woman take two steps, he knew her as well as if he'd seen her face.

"Opal!" he shouted. "You should stop."

The actress hesitated and then pressed on, pretending she hadn't been recognized. Marcus cursed, gritted his teeth, and kept running. The dark city ignored them. Opal shifted through streets and alleys, trying desperately to confuse or exhaust him. Marcus ignored his wounds and kept after her, one foot in front of the other, until by a wide cistern, Opal stopped, knelt, and put her head in her hands. Her chest was working like a bellows. Marcus tottered up beside her and sat. They were both wheezing like old men. Her pale hair caught the starlight.

"Not," Opal said between gasps. "Not what it looks like. You have to believe me."

"No," Marcus said. "I don't."

I didn't know," Master Kit said. "I should have, but I didn't."

Marcus's former cunning man was still in a striped wool sleeping shift and a close-fit nightcap. That and the fact that he'd been dead asleep in the back of the troupe's wagon when Marcus reached him argued for his innocence. Master Kitap rol Keshmet wasn't the picture of a man preparing to escape with his stolen gold. It was what Marcus had bet on.

The rooms they sat in now had been rented from a brewer. Most of the year, they warehoused the oats and malt of that trade, and the air was still thick with the smell of them. The table was three lengths of plank set across two piles of old brick, and the stools Marcus, Kit, and the disgraced Opal sat on were less than a milkmaid might use. In the flickering light of Master Kit's single candle, Opal's eyes had disappeared in pools of shadow. Her argument that it was all a misunderstanding, that she'd been there to protect Cithrin, vanished like the morning dew as soon as Master Kit had come into the room, and all that was left was her sullen silence.

"You mean to say she came to this herself and no one else in the company had a suspicion," Marcus said.

Master Kit sighed.

"I've traveled with Opal as long as I have with… well, anyone. I think she knows me, and I would guess well enough to know how to deceive me. Captain, if she had even lied about this, I'd have known."

"Leave him be, Wester," Opal said. "This wasn't his. It was mine."

It was the first confession she'd made. Marcus took no pleasure in it.

"But I don't understand why," Master Kit said. He wasn't talking to Marcus any longer. "I'd thought Cithrin was a favorite of yours."

“How many more years do I have?” Opal asked. Her voice was sharp as aged cheese. “You’re already thinking of Cary for Lady Kaunitar roles. Another five years, and I’ll be strictly witch-and-grandmother, and then the day will come when you and the others leave some shit-stinking village in Elassae and I don’t.”

“Opal,” Master Kit began, but the woman raised a palm to stop him.

“I know how this goes. I’ve been a player since I was younger than Sandr is now. I’ve seen it happen. Made a kind of peace with it, really. But then the banker’s girl appeared out of the air, and…” Opal shrugged, and it was an actor’s movement made of weariness and resignation.

Weariness and resignation, Marcus thought, but not regret.

“All right,” Marcus said. “Next problem.”

Master Kit turned back toward him. There were tears in the man’s eyes, but otherwise his expression was calm.

“I have five corpses,” Marcus said. “Maybe three hours to first light. If I go to the queensmen, I have to explain what happened, and what we’ve got in those boxes that’s worth killing over. Any hope of keeping quiet’s gone then. Add to that, we’ll have to move just in case any of Opal’s friends have friends of their own. We’ve sold the cart. You still have one.”

The cut in his shoulder had gone an uncomfortable sort of numb, but the scratch across his ribs tore open each time he took a deep breath. He knew that this was the point at which Master Kit might balk. Marcus had hoped he could avoid a long negotiation. He watched Master Kit’s dark eyes as the man weighed his unpleasant options.

“I feel the company owes you something, Captain Wester,” he said at last. “What would you have me do?”

An hour later, they were back in the small rooms of the salt quarter. The dead man had been pulled from the grate, and a new fire stoked. Hornet and Smit were somberly pasting lengths of cloth over the rips in the parchment while Cary, Sandr, and Mikel looked at the bodies piled like cordwood against the wall. Master Kit sat on an overturned handcart, his expression grim. Cithrin sat on the cot, her legs drawn up to her chest, her eyes empty. She didn’t look at Opal, and Opal didn’t look back. The room, small to begin with, felt dangerously crowded.

“There’s an opening in the eastern seawall, not far from baker’s row,” Master Kit said, thoughtfully. “I don’t remember much cover, nor any way to explain being there, but I think I could find it again.”

“Even in the dark?” Marcus asked.

“Yes. And if there’s no reason for us to be there, I think there’s little reason for anyone else either.”

“They look peaceful,” Mikel said. “I didn’t think they’d look peaceful.”

“All dead men are at peace,” Marcus said. “That’s what makes them dead. We’ve got five of these bastards to get rid of. We don’t have much time. How far is this place?”

“We’ll be seen,” Cithrin said. “They’ll find us. Ten people carrying five bodies? How does that…?”

The girl shook her head and looked down. Her face was paler even than usual. The others were quiet. If things had gone otherwise, there would only have been three bodies, and hers among them. Marcus could see the knowledge etching the girl’s soul, but he didn’t have time now to fix that, or any idea how he would have.

“Master Kit?” Cary said thoughtfully. “What about the festival scene in Andricore’s Folly?”

“You can’t be serious,” he said.

“I think I am,” Cary said. She turned to Yardem. “Can you carry one by yourself? Over your shoulder?”

The Tralgu crossed his arms, frowning deeply, but nodded. Master Kit’s face was still pale, but he rose and turned the handcart back onto its wheels, considering it. By contrast, Cary’s face was flushing rose.

“Yardem takes one,” she said. “Smit and Hornet can take the small one there. Sandr and Cithrin, the poor fellow with the beard. That puts two on the handcart. Mikel can steady them, and you and the captain haul. Then Opal and I take torches and—”

“Not Opal,” Master Kit said. “She stays with us.”

“I’ll take Cithrin, then,” Cary said, hardly missing a breath. “Opal can help Sandr.”

“You’ll take Cithrin where, exactly?” Marcus said, his voice low.

“To make sure no one is looking at *you,*” Cary said, and she stepped over to the cot, lowering herself beside Cithrin’s slight frame. The dark-haired woman put an arm across Cithrin’s shoulders and smiled at her gently. “Come on, sister mine. Are you ready to be brave?”

Cithrin blinked back tears.

“Kit?” Marcus said.

“Andricore’s Folly. It’s a comedy from a poet in Cabral,” Master Kit said. “The city prince dies in a brothel, and they have to smuggle his body back into his wife’s bed before she wakes.”

“And they manage it how?”

“It’s a comedy,” Master Kit said, shrugging. “Help me with this cart, won’t you?”

There were no torches, but two small tin lanterns in the back room came near enough. With a few pins and Cary’s direction, their dresses had grown short in the skirt, and half undone at the neck and back. Their hair hung in loose curls, threatening to fall at any moment, like

the ruins of some more respectable arrangement. Cary rouged Cithrin's lips and cheeks and the swell of her breast, and in the darkness of the night the pair seemed carved out of sunlight and the promise of sex.

"Count three hundred," Master Kit said to Cary. "Then follow. If I give the sign…"

"We'll start singing," Cary said, and then, to Cithrin, "Shoulders back, sister mine. We're here to be seen."

"Yardem?" Marcus said as the Tralgu hefted a dead man.

"Sir?"

"The day you throw me in a ditch and take the company?"

"I am the company, sir."

"Fair point."

They slipped into the darkness. The cold was bitter, and Marcus's breath fogged before him. The cobbles seemed made from ice, and the smell of death came from the cart, low and coppery and familiar as his own name. At his side, Master Kit pulled, the man's breath coming fast as panting. The living carried the dead through the black streets, guided by starlight and memory. Drying blood caked Marcus's side, plucking at his wounds with every step. He pressed himself forward. It seemed like a slow eternity, pain in his fingers giving way to numbness, and then pain again. Behind him, he heard Cary's voice suddenly rise in bawdy song, and then, like a river reed playing harmony to a trumpet, Cithrin's voice with hers. He looked over his shoulder. A block behind them, their lanterns held high above them, two scantily dressed women faced a patrol of queensmen. Marcus stopped, the handcart slowing as he dropped from the lead.

"Captain," Master Kit whispered urgently.

"This is idiocy," Marcus said. "This isn't your comedy, and that street's not a stage. Those are men with swords and power. Putting women in front of them and hoping for the best is—"

"What we've done, Captain," Master Kit said. "It's what we've done, and this is why. You should pull the cart now."

In the light of the lanterns, Cary twirled once, laughing. One of the queensmen draped a cloak over Cithrin's shoulders. Marcus realized he'd drawn his knife without knowing it. *They can't be trusted,* Marcus thought, looking at the guardians of civil peace in their cloaks of green and gold. *You can't trust them.*

"Captain?" Yardem asked.

"Go. Keep going," Marcus said and forced himself to turn away.

The break in the seawall was on the far eastern edge of the city. A stone walkway white with snow and gull droppings and black with ice and night looked out over an invisible ocean. Gulls nested in cracks in the walls around them and on the cliffs below. And there, a single

crack, no wider than a doorway where the city had constructed a siege weapon long since turned to rust to defend it against an enemy as dead as the bodies Marcus hauled.

They moved quickly and in silence. Yardem strode to the edge and lofted the corpse from his shoulder and into the grey predawn mist. Then Smit and Hornet, like men helping a drunken companion over the threshold. Then, together, the handcart with its human cargo. And last, Sandr and Opal, the woman limping under the weight of her burden, came to the edge. The last of the knife men vanished. There was no splash. Only the hush of the wind, the complaints of the birds, and faraway muttering of the surf.

"Yardem," Marcus said. "Get back to the rooms. I'll find Cithrin."

"Yes, sir," the Tralgu said, and vanished into the gloom.

"We'll need money to pay their fines," Smit said. "Can we afford that?"

"Seems wrong to charge them for public lewdness," Sandr said. "Most places you have to pay extra for it."

"I think we can do what we must," Master Kit said shortly. "You all go back to the cart. I believe the captain and I have some last business. Opal, please stay with us."

The players stood for a moment and then walked slowly away. Marcus listened to their footsteps fade. Sandr said something, and Smit replied darkly. Marcus couldn't make out the words. Master Kit and Opal stood, deeper black in the gloom all around. Marcus wished he could see their faces, and was also glad that he couldn't.

"I can't take her to the queensmen," Marcus said.

"I know," Master Kit said.

"I didn't tell anyone else," Opal said. "The only people who know about the banker girl's fortune are the ones who knew before."

"Unless one of your swimming friends down there told someone," Marcus said.

"Unless that," Opal admitted.

"It seems to me there are only two choices here, Captain. You won't appeal to the city's justice. Either Opal walks free, or she doesn't."

"That's truth," Marcus said.

"I would very much like you to let her walk away," Master Kit said. "She's already lost her place with me, and we've helped protect your work here. You're hurt, but Yardem Hane isn't. Or Cithrin. I won't say there's no harm done, but I hope there's room for mercy."

"Thank you, Kit," Opal said.

Marcus squinted up. The eastern sky had begun to show the first faint lightening of dawn. The stars in the great arch above him still glittered and shone, but the faintest of them had vanished. More would go out in the next few minutes. He'd been told that, in truth,

the stars were always there, only during the day you couldn't see them. He'd heard the same thing said about the souls of the dead. He didn't believe that either.

"I'd need to know she wouldn't come after us again," he said.

"I swear it," Opal said, jumping at his words. "I swear to all the gods that I won't make another try."

Master Kit made a sudden, pained sound, as if someone had struck him. Marcus took a step toward him, but when the man spoke, his voice was clear and strong and unutterably sad.

"Oh, my poor, dear Opal."

"Kit," she said, and there was an intimacy in the way she formed the word that made Marcus reassess everything he thought he knew about the two and their past.

"She's lying, Captain," Master Kit said. "I wish that she wasn't, but you have my word that she is. If she leaves here now, it's with the intention to come back."

"Well, then," Marcus said. "That's a problem."

The shadow that was Opal turned and tried to bolt, but Marcus stepped in front of her. She clawed at his eyes and made an inexpert try to knee his groin.

"Please. He's wrong. Kit's wrong. *Please* let me go."

The desperation in her voice, the *fear,* made him want to step aside. He was a soldier and a mercenary, not the kind of feral thug who killed women for the joy of it. He moved half a step back, but then remembered Cithrin again, sitting on the cot with her legs drawn to her knees, facing the swords of the patrol with awkward song. He'd promised to protect her if he could. Not only when it was pleasant.

He knew what had to happen next.

"I'm sorry about this," Marcus said.

Geder

Geder had known, of course, that Klin's favorites had been given the better accommodations, and that men like himself had taken the leavings. The scale of the insult, however, hadn't been clear. He sat on a low divan upholstered in silk. High windows spilled light over the floors like God upending a milk jug. Incense touched the air with vanilla and patchai. The goldwork and gems that glowed over the fire grate hadn't been wrenched apart in the sack. Even before the soldiers of Antea had taken the streets below, it had been understood that the prince's house was sacrosanct. Not because it was the prince's, but because it was Ternigan's. And then Klin's. And now, unthinkably, his own.

"My Lord Protector?"

Geder jumped to his feet as if he'd been caught touching something he shouldn't. The chief of household was an old Timzinae slave, his dark scales greying and cracked. He wore the grey and blue of House Palliako now, or as close to them as could be scrounged.

"Your secretaries await, sir," the Timzinae said.

"Yes," Geder said, plucking at the black leather cloak he'd brought from his old rooms. "Yes, of course. Take me there."

The orders had come three days before. The Lord Marshal had called Alan Klin back to Camnipol, to the despair of some, the delight of others, and the surprise of no one. The astonishing development was who Ternigan had chosen as his replacement until such time as King Simeon named a permanent governor. Geder had read the order ten times at least, checked the seal and signature, and then read it again. Sir Geder Palliako, son of Viscount of Rivenhalm Lerer Palliako, was now Protector of Vanai. He had the order still, folded in a pouch at his belt like a religious relic: mysterious and awesome and entirely unsafe.

His first thought after the first wave of raw disbelief had passed was that Klin had discovered Geder's betrayal, and that this was his revenge. As he stepped into the meeting chamber, Klin's appointees peopling every seat except the one on the dais at the front reserved for himself, Geder had the suspicion again. His belly sloshed and he felt his hands trembling. His blood felt weak as water as he took the two steps up and lowered himself uncomfortably into the presentation seat. Once, the room had been a chapel, and the icons of gods in whom Geder didn't believe surrounded him. Unsympathetic eyes

gazed up at him, expressions blank at best, openly contemptuous at worst. A handful of seats were empty. Loyalists of House Klin who had chosen to resign commission and return with him to Antea rather than submit to the new order. Geder wished he could have gone with them.

"Lords," Geder said. He sounded like someone was strangling him. He coughed, cleared his throat, and began again. "My lords, you will have read by now the orders of Lord Marshal Ternigan. I am, of course, honored and as surprised as I'm sure all of you are as well."

He chuckled. No one else made a sound. Geder swallowed.

"It's important that the city not suffer from a sense of unease during this change. I would like each of you to continue on with the directions and orders given by Lord Klin so that the… ah… change that we are—"

"You mean the policies that have him pulled back to Ternigan?" The questioner was Alberith Maas, eldest son of Estrian Maas and nephew of Klin's close ally Feldin.

"Excuse me?"

"The orders," the young man said. "They're the same ones that put Lord Klin in the crown's poor grace, and you want us to keep to them?"

"For now," Geder said, "yes."

"A bold decision, my Lord Protector."

Someone sniggered. Geder felt a rush of shame, and then anger. His jaw tightened.

"When I order a change, Lord Maas, I'll see that you know of it," he said. "We will all have to work to raise Vanai up from its present disorder."

So don't cross me, or I'll put you in charge of cleaning weeds out of the canals, Geder thought, but didn't say. The young man rolled his eyes but kept silent. Geder took a deep breath, letting the air curl slowly out through his nostrils. His enemies sat before him, looking up. Men of greater experience, with greater political connections, and who had not been given the power that Geder now held. For the most part they would be polite. They would say the right things, though often in the wrong tone of voice. In private, they would shake their heads and laugh at him.

Humiliation fueled his rage.

"Alan Klin was a failure." It was nothing he'd meant to say, and he threw the words out like a slap across the jowls. "The Lord Marshal gave him Vanai, and Klin pissed it away. And each of *you* were part of that failure. I know you are going to leave here and share your jokes and roll your eyes and tell yourselves it's all a terrible mistake."

He leaned forward now. The heat in his cheeks felt like courage.

"But, my very good lords, let me make this clear. *I* am the one Lord

Ternigan chose. *I* am the one he picked to turn Vanai from an embarrassment into a jewel in King Simeon's crown. And I intend to do so. If you would rather make light of me and of the duty we are given, say it now, take your things, and crawl back to Camnipol on your bellies. But stand off *my path*!"

He was shouting now. The fear was gone, the humiliation with it. He didn't remember standing, but he was on his feet now, his finger pointing a general accusation at the group. Their eyes were wide, their brows risen. He could see unease in the angle of their shoulders and the way they held their hands.

Good, he thought. *Let them wonder who and what Geder Palliako is.*

"If Lord Klin has left pressing business, I'll hear it now. Otherwise, I will have reports from each of you by tomorrow on the state of the city in general, your particular responsibilities within it, and how you propose to do better."

There was silence for the space of four heartbeats together. Geder let himself feel a trickle of pleasure.

"Lord Palliako?" a man said from the back. "There's the grain taxes?"

"What about them?"

"Lord Klin was entertaining a proposal to change them, sir. But he didn't give a decision before he left. You see, fresh grain coming in from the countryside is taxed at two silver to the bushel, but sold from storage in the city runs two and a half. The local granaries appealed."

"Put them all at two and a half," Geder said.

"Yes, Lord Protector," the man said.

"What else?"

There was nothing more. Geder stalked from the room quickly, before the heat of his temper could fully cool. When the brief certainty of anger passed, it passed completely. By the time he returned to his drawing room—*his* drawing room—he was shaking from head to foot. He sat by the window, looking out on the main square of the city, and tried to guess whether he was on the verge of laughter or tears. Below him, dry leaves skittered. The canal lay bare and dry, a team of slaves of several races hauling armfuls of weeds and filth out of it. A handful of Firstblood girls ran across the square, screaming in their play. He told himself that they were his now. Slaves, girls, leaves. All of it. It frightened him.

"Geder Palliako, Lord Protector of Vanai," he said to the empty air, hoping that by speaking the words they would become plausible. It didn't work. He tried to imagine what Lord Ternigan had intended when he'd chosen him. Nothing made sense. He took the letter out again, unfolded it, read each word, each phrase, searching for something to reassure him. There was nothing there.

“My Lord Protector,” the old Timzinae said. Geder jumped less this time. “Lord Kalliam has come, as you asked.”

“Bring him in,” Geder said. The old servant hesitated, as if on the verge of pointing out a breach of etiquette, but turned away after only a bow. Geder wondered if meeting in the private drawing room was supposed to be reserved for special occasions. He’d have to find a book on Vanai court etiquette. Next time he spoke to his hired scholars, he’d mention it.

Jorey Kalliam stepped into the room. He was in his best uniform, and bowed before Geder formally. Either Jorey was also exhausted and apprehensive, or else Geder was seeing all the world as a mirror. The Timzinae wheeled a cart in behind him laden with small shell dishes of pistachios and candied pears. Once the servant had poured them both crystal mugs of cool water, he retreated. The discreet click of the door latch left them alone.

“My Lord Protector wished to see me?” Jorey said.

Geder tried out a smile.

“Who’d have guessed it, eh? Me, Lord Protector of Vanai.”

“I think we all would have put long odds,” Jorey said.

“Yes. Yes, it’s why I wanted to speak with you in particular,” Geder said. “Your father’s active in court, isn’t he? And you write to him. You said that you write to him?”

“I do, my lord,” Jorey said. His spine was stiff, his eyes set straight ahead.

“Yes, that’s good. I was wondering if… that’s to say, ah, do you know why?”

“Why what, my lord?”

“Why me?” Geder said, and his voice had a thin violin-string of whine at the back that embarrassed him.

Jorey Kalliam, son of Dawson Kalliam, opened his mouth, closed it, and frowned. The lines at his mouth and brow made him seem older. Geder took a small handful of pistachios from their dish, cracking the shells open and eating the soft, salty meat within less from hunger than for something to do with his hands.

“You put me in an awkward position, my lord.”

“Geder. Please, call me Geder. And I’ll call you Jorey. If that’s all right. I think you’re the nearest thing to a friend I have in this city.”

Jorey took a long breath, and as he let it hiss out between his teeth, his eyes softened.

“God help you,” Jorey said. “I think I am.”

“Then can you tell me what’s happening at court that Ternigan would put *me* here? I don’t have a patron at court. It’s my first campaign. I just don’t understand it. And I hoped you might.”

Jorey gestured to a chair, and Geder realized after a moment that he

was asking permission to sit. Geder waved him on and sat across from him, hands clasped between his knees. Jorey's eyes shifted as if he were reading something from the air. Geder ate another nut.

"Of course, I don't know Ternigan's mind," he said. "But I know things at home are unsettled. Klin is allied with Curtin Issandrian, and Issandrian's been championing some changes that haven't all gone over well. He's made enemies."

"Is that why Ternigan called him back?"

"It's likely part, but if Issandrian's power at court is starting to waver, Ternigan might want someone who wasn't affiliated with him. You said you don't have a patron at court. That might be the reason he chose you. Because House Palliako hasn't taken a side."

Geder had read of any number of situations like it. The White Powder Wars, when Cabral had played host to exiles from Birancour and Herez both. Koort Ncachi, the fourth Regos of Borja, who was supposed to have had a court so corrupt he named a random farmer as regent. Considered at that angle, Geder saw a way that his new position could be made explicable. And still…

"Well," he said with an awkward grin, "I suppose I should be grateful my father doesn't go to court, then. I'm sorry, though, that yours does. I really thought Ternigan might give the city to you."

Jorey Kalliam turned his face to the window. His brows were furrowed. In the grate, the fire murmured its secrets to itself, and in the square, a thousand pigeons rose as if they were part of a single body and whirled through the white winter sky.

"It wouldn't have been a favor," Jorey said at last. "Court games aren't fair, Palliako. They don't judge men by their worth, and they aren't about what's just. Guilty men can hold power their whole lives and be wept for when they pass. Innocent men can be spent like coins because it's convenient. You don't have to have sinned for them to ruin you. If your destruction is useful to them, you'll be destroyed. This, all of this? It isn't your fault."

"I understand," Geder said.

"I don't think you do."

"I know I didn't earn this," Geder said. "Raw luck's given me this chance, and now it's my work to deserve it. I didn't think Lord Ternigan put me over the city because he respected me. I'm convenient. That's fine. Now I can make him respect me. I can steer Vanai. I can *make* it work."

"Can you?" Jorey said.

"I can try," Geder said. "I'm sure my father's been bragging about this to everyone he can find. House Palliako hasn't taken a new title since my grandfather was Warden of Lakes. I know it's something my father wanted, and with me here now…"

“This isn’t fair,” Jorey said.

“It’s not,” Geder said. “But I swear I’ll do what I can to make it up to you.”

“Make it up to *me*?” Jorey said, as if Geder had suddenly dropped in from some other conversation.

Geder rose, took the two water mugs from the tray, and put one in Jorey’s hand. With all the seriousness he could muster, he raised his glass.

“Vanai is mine,” Geder said, and this time it sounded almost true. “And if there is anything within it that would do you the honor you deserve, I’ll find it. This city should have been yours, and we both know it. But since it’s dropped in my lap instead, I swear here, between the two of us, that I won’t forget that it was luck.”

The expression on Jorey Kalliam’s face might have been pity or horror or raw disbelief.

“I need you beside me,” Geder said. “I need allies. And on behalf of Vanai and House Palliako, I would be honored if you were one of them. You’re a valiant man, Jorey Kalliam, and one whose judgment I trust. Will you stand with me?”

The silence left Geder apprehensive. He held his glass determinedly aloft and quietly prayed Jorey would return the salute.

“Did you practice that?” Jorey asked at last.

“A bit, yes,” Geder said.

Jorey rose to his feet and raised his own glass. The water splashed and slid down his knuckles.

“Geder, I will do what I can,” he said. “It may not be much, and God’s witness, I don’t see how this ends well, but I’ll do what I can to make things right for you.”

“Good enough,” Geder said, and drank his water through a grin.

The rest of the day was as much a test of endurance as a parade of honors. The afternoon began with a congratulatory feast presented by the representatives of the major guilds of Vanai, two dozen men and women each pressing for his attention and favor. After that, he held audiences with a representative from Newport who was angling to make changes in the overland shipping charges, but over the course of a long, contentious hour wouldn’t make it precisely clear what the changes were. Then, at Geder’s request, the chief taxation auditor reviewed all of Klin’s previous reports to Lord Ternigan and the crown. Geder had expected that meeting to be little more than a summation of how much gold had been sent north, but it ended up going twice as long as he’d intended with discussions of the difference between high- and low-function tariffs and “presentation on account” against “presentation in earnest” that left him feeling like he’d been reading something in a language that he hadn’t yet mastered.

At the day's end, he retired to the bed chamber that had once belonged to the prince of Vanai. It could have fit Geder's previous accommodations in a corner and left room for two more like it. The windows looked out over a garden of leafless oaks and snowbound flowerbeds. In spring, it would be like having a private forest. Geder's new bed was warmed by an ingenious network of pipes that led to and from a great fire grate, the pump driven by the rising air. The contraption burbled to itself, sometimes directly beneath Geder, as if the feather mattresses had eaten something that disagreed with them. Geder lay in the dim, firelit room for almost an hour after the last servant had been dismissed. Though he was exhausted, sleep would not come. When he rose, it was with the delicious sense of doing something he ought not do, clear in the knowledge that he would get away with it.

He lit three candles from the fire, blackening the wax a bit with the smoke, and set them beside his bed. Then from the small cache of his own things brought here by his squire, he plucked the creaking binding of the book he'd most recently bought. He'd read it through already, and marked the section that he found most interesting so that he could find it easily.

Legends of the Righteous Servant, also called Sinir Kushku in the language of the ancient Pût, place it as the final and greatest weapon of Morade, though the degree to which this is simple confabulation with the dragon's network of spies and the curiously insightful nature of his final madness remains unclear.

Geder put his finger over the words, fighting to remember what he knew of the languages of the east.

Sinir Kushku.

The End of All Doubt.

Cithrin

I'm saying there is evil in the world," Master Kit said, hefting the box on his hip, "and *doubt* is the weapon that guards against it."

Yardem took the box from the old actor's hands and lifted it to the top of the pile.

"But if you doubt everything," the Tralgu said, "how can anything be justified?"

"Tentatively. And subject to later examination. It seems to me the better question is whether there's any virtue in committing to a permanent and unexamined certainty. I don't believe we can say that."

Captain Wester made a noise in the back of his throat like a dog preparing for the attack. Cithrin felt herself start to cringe back, but didn't let her body follow the impulse through.

"We can say," the captain said, "that wasting good air on the question won't get the work done any faster."

"Sorry, sir," the Tralgu said.

Master Kit nodded his apology and went back down the thin wooden stairs to the street. Sandr and Hornet, coming up with a box of gems between them, flattened themselves to the wall to let him pass. Cithrin shifted, giving them room enough to pass the new box to Yardem, and Yardem enough to find a place for it in the new rooms. A cold, damp breeze and the smell of fresh horse droppings wafted through the open windows along with the daylight. Cithrin thought it seemed like springtime.

"Was he a priest as a boy?" Marcus said, pointing down the stairway with his chin. "He starts talking about faith and doubt and the nature of truth, it's like we're back in the 'van getting a sermon with every meal."

"What he says makes sense," Yardem said.

"To you," Marcus replied.

"Suppose he might have been a priest. It's Master Kit," Hornet said with a shrug. "If he told us he'd walked up the mountainside and drank beer with the moon, I'd probably believe it. We've got two more boxes the size of that one, and then all those wax blocks."

"Wax?" Marcus asked.

"The books," Cithrin said, but the words came out as a croak. She coughed and began again. "The books and ledgers. They're sealed against the damp."

Which is a good thing, she thought, *since we sank them in a mill pond.* Immediately, she imagined a crack in the sealing wax. Pages and pages of smeared ink and rotting paper hidden by the protecting wraps. What if the books were ruined? What would she tell Magister Imaniel then? What would she tell the bankers in Carse?

"Well, bring them up," Marcus said. "We'll find a place for them somewhere."

Hornet nodded, but Sandr was already going down the stairs. He hadn't even looked at her. She told herself it didn't bother her.

Cithrin was very aware that the new rooms didn't entirely meet with Captain Wester's approval. Unlike the place in the salt quarter, these were on the second story with woodplank floors that reported any motion to the floor below in a language of creaks and pops. The shop on the first floor was a gambler's stall, which meant any number of people of any status might come and go throughout the day. But the lock at the base of the stair was sturdy, surrounding streets less prone to the drunken and the lost, and the windows without balcony or simple access. Additionally, there was an alley window out which the pisspot could be emptied, and the change of location had landed her five doors down from a taproom where they could buy food and beer.

Cary and Mikel came up next. Cary was grinning.

"Boy on the street asked us what we were hauling," Cary said.

Cithrin could see the tension in Captain Wester's face as he walked to the window and peered out.

"What did you tell him?"

"Paste jewels for the First Thaw celebrations," Cary said. "Opened one of the boxes for him, too. You should have seen it. He looked so *disappointed.*"

Cary laughed, not seeing the anger on Captain Wester's face. Or perhaps seeing it and not caring. During the days when they'd looked for new rooms and prepared to shift the smuggled wealth of Vanai to its new hiding place, Opal had only been mentioned once when Smit had joked that she'd found a way to keep from having to do any of the hard work. Nobody had laughed.

Cithrin still had to fight herself to believe that it had happened. That Opal had meant to slaughter her and take the money was hard enough to comprehend. That Captain Wester had killed her for it was worse. Of course the others were angry. Of course they resented the captain. And Yardem. And her. They had to. And here they were, hauling boxes and making jokes. Cithrin found that she trusted them —each and every one of them—not because they were trustworthy, but because she wanted them to be.

She'd made the mistake with Opal, and she was watching herself

make it again. That knowledge alone twisted her badly enough she hadn't slept or eaten well since the night she'd woken up with five dead men around her.

Master Kit came up the stairs, a double armful of wrapped books before him. Then Sandr and Hornet with the last of the boxes. With everything from the cart, there wasn't much room left for them all. Sandr was trapped standing beside her. When he saw her looking at him, he blushed and nodded the bird-fast twitch he might use to greet someone in the street.

"I believe this is the last of it," Master Kit said as Yardem lifted the books from him.

"Thank you for this," Cithrin said. "All of you."

"It's the least we could," Smit said. "We're only sorry it happened this way."

"Yes, well," Cithrin said. She couldn't meet his eyes.

"Why don't the rest of you go on," Master Kit said. "I'll try to catch up in a bit."

The actors nodded and left. Cithrin heard their voices through the window as their cart pulled away. Captain Wester stalked around the room as if his restlessness and impatience would make the floorboards quieter and more certain. Yardem stretched out on the cot nestled between piles of boxes and closed his eyes, resting before the night came. Master Kit rose and held a hand out to her.

"Cithrin," he said, "I was hoping we might walk together."

She looked from the old actor's hand to Captain Wester and back.

"Where?" she said.

"I didn't have anyplace particularly in mind," Master Kit said. "I thought the walking might be enough."

"All right," Cithrin said, and let him help her to her feet.

Outside, the street traffic shifted like water; broad and slow in the wide square to the east, faster in the narrow channel of the street. A Cinnae man stood outside the gambler's stall, calling to the men and women walking past. Great fortune could be theirs. Luck favored the brave. They could soften the loss of business by wagering against themselves. Odds offered on any fair wager. He sounded bored.

Horse-drawn carts labored through the press, and a team of Timzinae walked behind them with flat-bladed shovels, picking up their droppings. Half a dozen children screamed and chased each other, splashing through puddles of mud and grime and worse. A laundry cart rattled by, pulled by a Firstblood girl no older than Cithrin, but with lines of hardship already forming in the angles of her mouth. Master Kit strode forth and Cithrin let him lead, unsure whether she was walking behind him or at his side.

The street opened into a square Cithrin hadn't seen before. A huge

church loomed to the east. Voices raised in song wove through the chill air, praising God and working through harmonic puzzles as if the two pursuits were one. Master Kit paused when she did, listening with her. The smile on his face softened into something touched with sorrow.

"It is lovely, isn't it?" he said.

"What is?" Cithrin asked.

He leaned against a stone wall and gestured out. The square, the song, the sky above them.

"I suppose I meant the world. For all the tragedy and pain, I do, at least, find it beautiful."

Cithrin felt her lips press tight. She wanted to apologize for what had happened to Opal, but that would only put Master Kit in a position where he had to apologize again, and she didn't want to do that. Words and thoughts banged against each other, none of them quite right for the moment.

"What will you do now?" she said.

Kit took a deep breath and let it out slowly before turning away from the song.

"I expect we'll stay here for the time being. I don't think Cary's quite ready to take on the full burden of Opal's roles, but by the end of the summer, with some rehearsal and serious work, I expect she will be. Between the armies of Vanai and now Opal, the company's a bit thinner than I like. I hope we'll be able to recruit a few good people. I've found port cities often collect itinerant actors."

Cithrin nodded. Kit waited for her to speak, and when she didn't, went on.

"Besides which, I find myself rather fascinated by your Captain Wester."

"He's not *my* Captain Wester," Cithrin said. "He's made it perfectly clear that he's his own Captain Wester."

"Has he, then? I stand corrected," Master Kit said. The church song swelled, what could have been a hundred voices rising and falling, throbbing against each other until it seemed like some other voice threatened to speak through them. God whispering. It seemed to pull Master Kit's attention, but when he spoke he hadn't lost the conversation's thread. "I believe the dragons left a legacy in this world that is… destructive. Corrosive by nature, and doomed to cause pain. Unchecked, it will eat the world. Wester is one of the few people I've met who I thought might stand against it."

"Because he's so stubborn?" Cithrin asked, trying to make it a joke.

"Yes, because of that," Master Kit said. "And, I suppose, the shape of his soul."

"He was a general in Northcoast a long time ago," Cithrin said.

“Something happened to his wife, I think.”

“He led Prince Springmere’s army in the succession. There were battles against the armies of Lady Tracian that should have been lost, but Captain Wester won them.”

“Wodford and Gradis,” Cithrin said. “But people also talk about… Ellis?”

“Yes. The fields of Ellis. They say it was the worst battle in the war, that no one wanted it and no one could back down. The story is he was so important that the prince grew afraid that another of the pretenders might seduce his loyalty. Convince him to change sides. Springmere had his family killed and his rival implicated. The captain’s wife and daughter died in front of him, and badly even as these things go.”

“Oh,” Cithrin said. “What happened to Springmere? I know he lost the succession, but…”

“Our friend Marcus found out what had really happened, took his revenge, and then dropped out of history. I think most people assumed he died. In my experience, the worst thing that can happen to a man in that position is that he live long enough to see how little vengeance leaves after it. I don’t think he has many illusions left to him, which is why he’s…” Master Kit shook himself. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to wander off like that. Getting old, I think. I had wanted to say again that I’m sorry for what happened, and I am deeply committed to seeing that it not happen again.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“I would also like to offer whatever help I can in seeing you safely to Carse. I feel we owe you more than a day’s free labor. A bit odd, I know, but I think pretending to be soldiers for so long left us all with a bit of the camaraderie of the sword.”

Cithrin nodded, but she felt her brow furrow even before she knew quite why. The church song sank in a final, conclusive cadence, and silence seemed to flow into the world like a wave. Seagulls looped through the high air, yellow beaks and steady, unflapping wings.

“Why do you apologize for everything you say?” she asked.

Master Kit turned to her, bushy eyebrows hoisted.

“I wasn’t aware that I did,” he said.

“You just did it again,” Cithrin said. “You never say anything straight out. It’s all *I believe* this or *I’ve found* that. You never say, *The sun rises in the morning.* It’s always, *I think the sun rises in the morning.* It’s like you’re trying not to promise anything.”

Master Kit went sober. His dark eyes considered her. Cithrin felt a chill run down her spine, but it wasn’t fear. It was like being on the edge of finding something that she’d only guessed was there. Master Kit rubbed a palm across his chin. The sound was soft and intimate

and utterly mundane.

"I'm surprised you noticed that," he said, then smiled at having done it again. "I have a talent for being believed, and I've found it to be problematic. I suppose I've adopted habits to soften the effect, and so I try not to assert things unless I'm certain of them. Absolutely certain, I mean. I'm often surprised by how little I'm absolutely certain of."

"That's an odd choice," Cithrin said.

"And it encourages me to take myself lightly," Master Kit said. "I find a certain value in lightness."

"I wish I could," she said. The despair in her voice surprised her, and then she was weeping.

The actor blinked, his arms shifting uncertainly, and Cithrin stood in the open street embarrassed by her own sobbing, but powerless to stop. Master Kit wrapped an arm around her and led her forward to the steps of the church. His cloak was cheap wool, rough and still smelling of lanolin. He draped it over her shoulders. She leaned forward, her head on her knees. She felt the fear and the sorrow, but only at a distance. But the landslide had begun, and there was nothing she could do now but let it go. Master Kit placed his hand on her back, just between her shoulder blades, and rubbed gently, like a man soothing a baby. After a while, the sobs grew less violent. The tears dried. Cithrin eventually found her voice.

"I can't do this," she said. How many thousand times had she told herself that since the day Besel died? But always to herself. This was the first time she'd said the words aloud to anyone. They tasted sour. "I can't do this."

Master Kit took his arm back, but still shared his rough, cheap cloak. A few of the people walking by stared, but most ignored them. The old actor's skin smelled like a spice shop. Cithrin wanted to curl up there on the cold stone steps, sleep, and never wake up.

"You can," Master Kit said.

"No, I—"

"Cithrin, stop. Listen to my voice," Master Kit said.

Cithrin turned. He looked older than she remembered him, and it took a moment to realize it was because he wasn't smiling, even in the corner of his eyes. There were pouches under his eyes. His jowls sagged, and the stubble of his beard was more white than black. Cithrin waited.

"You can do this," he said. "No, just listen to me. You can do this."

"You mean you think that I can," she said. "Or you expect that I will."

"No. I meant what I said. *You can do this.*"

Something in the back of Cithrin's mind shifted. Something in her

blood altered, like the surface of a pond rippling when a fish has passed too close beneath it. The overwhelming sorrow was still there, the fear that she would fail, the sense of being at the mercy of a wild and violent world. None of it went away. Only with it, there was something else. Hardly brighter than a firefly in the darkness of her mind, there was a new thought: *Perhaps.*

Cithrin rubbed her eyes with the palms of her hands and shook her head. The sun had shifted farther and faster than she'd expected. She didn't know how long ago they'd left the new rooms.

"Thank you," she said softly.

"I felt I owed it to you," Master Kit said. He seemed tired.

"Should we go back?"

"If you're ready, I think we should."

Evening came later than Cithrin expected, another sign that winter was beginning to lose its grip. Yardem Hane sat on the floor, his huge legs crossed, and ate rice and fish from a plate. Captain Wester paced.

"If we pick the wrong ship," the captain said, "they'll murder us, throw our bodies to the sharks, and spend the rest of their lives living high in some port in Far Syramys or Lyoneia. But we'd only have the customs house here and the one in Carse to go past. On the road, we might have to weather half a dozen tax collectors."

Cithrin looked at her own plate of fish, her belly too knotted to eat. Every word Wester said made it worse.

"We could backtrack," Yardem said. "Go to the Free Cities, and north from there. Or back to Vanai, for that."

"Without a caravan to hide in?" Marcus said.

The Tralgu shrugged, conceding the point. Behind the constant motion of the captain's legs, the wax-sealed books of the Vanai bank glowed in the candlelight. Cithrin's anxiety circled back to them, images of cracked seal and rotting leather spines dancing through her head like a nightmare that wouldn't fade.

"We could buy a fishing boat," Yardem said. "Sail it ourselves. Hug the coast."

"Fighting off pirates with our forceful personalities?" Marcus said. "Cabral is half rotten with free ships stealing the trade they can, and King Sephan isn't about to stop them."

"No good options," Yardem said.

"None. And weeks still before we can take the bad ones," Marcus said.

Cithrin put her plate on the ground and walked past Captain Wester. She took the topmost of the books, looked around the dim, gold-lit room, and found the short blade Yardem had used to carve

cheese at midday. The blade was shining clean.

"What are you doing?" Marcus asked.

"I can't choose the right ship," Cithrin said, "or the right path, or a caravan to hide in. But I can see that the books aren't wet, so I'm doing that."

"We'll just have to seal them again," Marcus said, and Cithrin ignored him. The wax was as thick as her thumb, and came off in stubborn chunks. A layer of cloth beneath it gave way to a softer inner layer of wax, and then parchment wrapping. The book hidden inside it all could have been fresh from Magister Imaniel's desk. Cithrin opened it, and the pages hissed against each other. The familiar marks of Magister Imaniel's handwriting were like a memory from childhood, and Cithrin almost wept again seeing them. Her fingers traced sums and notations, balances, transactions, details of contract and return rate. Magister Imaniel's signature and the brown, cracked blood of his thumb. She let them wash over her, familiar and foreign at the same time. Here was the deposit the bank had taken from the bakers' guild, and there in blue ink, a record of the payments made as recompense, month by month, for the years they'd held the money. She turned the page. Here was the record of loss on shipping insurance from the year that the storms had come up from Lyoneia later than ever before. The sums shocked her. She hadn't guessed that the loss had been so profound. She closed the book, took her blade, and found another. Marcus and Yardem were still talking, but they could have been in another city for all it mattered to her.

The next book was older, and she followed the history of the bank in it, from the letters of foundation that began it through the years of transactions, almost until the day she'd left. The history of Vanai written in numbers and ciphered notes. And there, in red, a small notation of Cithrin bel Sarcour accepted as ward of the Medean bank until she reached legal age and took over the balance of her parents' deposits, less the costs of keeping her. There were as many words spent on a grain shipment or investment in a brewery. The death of her parents, the beginning of the only life she'd known, all on a single line.

She got another book.

Marcus stopped talking, ate his dinner, and curled up on the cot. The half moon rose. Cithrin traced the history of the bank like she was reading old letters sent from home. Wax and cloth and parchment mounded around her like wrapping paper. Growing in the back of her mind, almost forgotten in the fascination of old ink and dusty paper, was a sense of possibility. Not confidence—not yet—but its precursor.

It was only when Yardem woke her by taking the leather-bound book from her hand that she realized that—for the first time since

Opal—she'd slept dreamless through the night.

Dawson

Rough, plank-board ladders and improvised stairways lined the sides of the Division, clinging to the ancient ruins like lichen to a stone. High above, the great bridges spanned the gap with stone and steel and dragon's jade: Silver Bridge, Autumn Bridge, Stone Bridge, and almost lost in the haze the Prisoner's Span hung with cages and straps. Lower, where the sides came close enough, rope lines swung and rotted in the air. Between them the history of the city lay bare, each stratum showing an age and empire on which the one above had been founded.

Dawson, wrapped in a simple brown cloak, could have passed for a scavenger from the midden at the Division's base or a smuggler making his way to the obscure underground passages that laced Camnipol's foundation. Vincen Coe might have been his conspirator or his son. The morning frost kept their footsteps slow. The smell of the rising air was nauseating—sewage, horse manure, rotting food, the bodies of animals and of men barely better than animals.

Dawson found the archway. Ancient, flaking stone shaped in classic form, an inscription eroded to illegibility but not yet washed away. Within, the darkness was absolute.

"I don't like this, my lord," the huntsman said.

"You don't need to," Dawson said, and walked proudly into the gloom.

Winter's hand still pressed on Camnipol, but its power was breaking. The underground was alive with tiny sounds: the chitter of the first insects of the coming spring, the sharp trickle of thaw streams, and the soft breath of the land itself preparing to wake itself again into green spring. It would be weeks yet, and then it would seem to come overnight. It occurred to Dawson as he paused in a wide, vaulted tile of an abandoned bathing chamber, how many things followed that same pattern. The seemingly endless stasis followed by a few small signs, and then sudden catastrophic change. He pulled the letter from his pocket and leaned back toward Coe to read it again in the torchlight. Canl Daskellin had written that one of the doorways would be marked with a square. Dawson squinted into the darkness. Perhaps Daskellin had a younger man's eyes…

"Here, my lord," Coe said, and Dawson grunted. Now that it was pointed out, the mark was clear enough. Dawson walked down the short, sloping hall that turned into a stairway.

“No guards yet,” Dawson said.

“There are, sir,” Coe said. “We’ve passed three. Two archers and one manning a deadfall.”

“Well hidden, then.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“You don’t sound reassured.”

The huntsman didn’t answer. The hall met a huge stone, its surface polished and glazed so well that the torchlight seemed to double. Dawson followed his shadow around a slow curve until an answering light appeared. Dragon’s jade carved into unbreakable pillars held up a low ceiling. A dozen candles filled the dusty air with soft light. And there, sitting in a carved round, was Canl Daskellin with Dawson’s old acquaintance Odderd Faskellan on his left and a pale Firstblood man Dawson didn’t recognize on his right.

“Dawson!” Canl said. “I was beginning to worry.”

“No need,” Dawson said, waving Vincen Coe back toward the shadows. “I’m only pleased I was in the city. I’d hoped to spend part of the year in Osterling Fells.”

“Next year,” Odderd said. “God willing, we’ll all be back to normal next year. Though with this latest news…”

“There’s news, then?” Dawson said.

Canl Daskellin gestured to the seat across from him, and Dawson lowered himself into it. The pale man smiled politely.

“I don’t think we know each other,” Dawson said to the smile.

“Dawson Kalliam, Baron of Osterling Fells,” Daskellin said with a grin of his own. “May I introduce the solution to our problems. This is Paerin Clark.”

“The pleasure is mine, Baron Osterling,” the pale man said. His voice had the slushy accent of Northcoast. Dawson felt the small hairs on his arm rise. The man had no title. He wasn’t Antean. And yet he was here.

“What’s the news,” Dawson said. “And how does our new friend here enter into it?”

“He’s married to the youngest daughter of Komme Medean,” Odderd said. “He lives in Northcoast. Carse.”

“I wasn’t aware we had business with the Medean bank,” Dawson said.

“Issandrian knows what we’ve been doing,” Daskellin said. “Not only Vanai. The men we placed to stir trouble with the farmers, the move to strip Feldin Maas of his southern holdings. Everything.”

Dawson waved the words away as if they were gnats. He was more concerned that this banker appeared to know it all as well. Issandrian would have discovered their traps and schemes eventually.

“He’s petitioned King Simeon to sponsor games,” Odderd said.

“Issandrian and Klin and Maas, and half a dozen more besides. They’re putting up the coin for it. Cleaning out the stadium. Hiring show fighters and horesemen. Borjan long archers. Cunning men. It’s supposed to be a celebration for Prince Aster.”

“It’s a fighting force inside the walls of Camnipol,” Canl Daskellin said.

“It’s a bluff a child could see through,” Dawson said. “If it came to insurrection, Issandrian would lose. He doesn’t have the men or the money to back a war.”

“*Ah,*” the banker said.

Dawson lifted his chin like a forest animal scenting smoke. Canl Daskellin took a handful of folded paper from the seat beside him and held them out to Dawson. The paper was cheap, the handwriting plain and unadorned. Copies, then, of some more prestigious correspondence. Dawson squinted. The dim light set the words swimming, but with a little concentration he could make them out clearly enough. *I send the best wishes to you and your family* and so on. *Our mutual great-aunt, Ekarina Sakiallin, Baroness of the noble lands of Sirinae…*

“Sirinae,” Dawson said. “That’s in Asterilhold.”

“Our friend Feldin Maas has family in the court,” Odderd said. “Part of making peace after the Treaty of Astersan was a fashion for strategic marriages. It’s three generations back now, but the ties are still there. Maas has been sending letters to a dozen of his cousins that we know of. There may be others we didn’t intercept.”

“They’ve gone mad,” Dawson said. “If they think they can bring in Asterilhold against King Simeon—”

“That isn’t the story,” the banker said. His voice was cool and dry as fresh paper, and Dawson was instinctively repulsed by it. “Maas has been telling of a conservative conspiracy of hidebound old men within the court pressuring King Simeon. He describes men who are willing to ally themselves with enemies of Antea for their own political gain.”

“Idiocy.”

“He suggests,” the banker said, “that Maccia may have been invited to defend Vanai by someone who opposed Alan Klin, and he makes a plausible case. And so, in the face of others seeking foreign help to influence the throne, Maas has no option but to appeal for the aid of Asterilhold in defending the honor and legitimate rule of King Simeon and safeguarding the person and health of Prince Aster.”

“We’re the ones defending Simeon!” Dawson shouted.

“As you say,” the banker said.

Canl Daskellin leaned forward. His eyes were bright.

“Things are starting, Dawson. If Issandrian’s cabal has gotten the backing of Asterilhold to put an armed force in Camnipol—and, by

God, I think they have—they aren't coming for Simeon. They're aiming at us."

"They've already tried to kill you once," Odderd said. "These men have no sense of bounds or honor. We can't afford to treat them as if they were gentlemen. We have to beat them to the blow."

Dawson lifted his hands, commanding silence. Anger and mistrust filled his head like bees. He pointed to the banker.

"What's Northcoast's interest in this?" he asked. Meaning, *Why are you here?* Daskellin frowned at his tone of voice, but the banker seemed to take no offense.

"I couldn't say. Lord Daskellin is Special Ambassador to Northcoast. I'm sure he would be in a better position to sound out the more influential opinions."

"But your bank's in Carse," Dawson said. It was almost an accusation.

"The holding company is, and we have a branch there," the banker said. "But all our branches account independently."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Dawson said.

"We aren't a company exclusively married to the interests of Northcoast," the banker said. "We have a close relationship with people in many courts—even Antea now that Vanai is under your protection—and a strong interest in peace throughout the northern kingdoms. Unfortunately, we have some very strict policies about lending in situations like this—"

"I wouldn't take your money if you left it in a sock on my doorstep."

"Kalliam!" Canl Daskellin said, but the banker continued on as if nothing had been said.

"—but in the cause of peace and stability, we would be pleased to act as intermediary if we were of use. As disinterested third parties, we might be able to approach people that you noble gentlemen found awkward."

"We don't need help."

"I understand," the banker said.

"Don't be an idiot," Daskellin said. "The Medean bank has branches in Narinisle and Herez. Elassae. If this comes to blades in the street, we'll need—"

"We shouldn't be talking about this," Dawson said. "We have guests."

The banker smiled and gave a brief nod. Dawson wished that etiquette allowed him to challenge a man of no status to a duel. The banker was nothing more than a trumped-up merchant. He should have been beneath Dawson's notice, but something about the man's studied placidity invited the drawing of blood. Canl Daskellin's brows were nearly a single knot, and Odderd was shifting his gaze between

the others like a mouse at a catfight.

"I have known Paerin Clark and his family for years," Daskellin said, his voice tight and controlled. "I have absolute faith in his discretion."

"How sweet for you," Dawson said. "I met him today."

"Please, my lords," the banker said. "I came to make my position clear. I have done so. If Lord Kalliam should have a change of heart, the Medean bank's offer stands. If not, then surely no harm's done."

"We'll continue this another time," Dawson said, rising to his feet.

"Oh yes. We will," Daskellin said. Odderd said nothing, but the banker rose and bowed to Dawson as he left. Vincen Coe fell in behind him without a word. Dawson stalked up, following the winding paths that led through the roots of Camnipol.

When at length they reached the street, his legs ached and his rage had faded. Coe doused the torch in a snowbank, the pitch leaving a filthy smear on the white. Dawson had chosen to walk rather than take his carriage in part to show any of Issandrian's hired thugs that he didn't fear them, but also in the name of discretion. Leaving his own team sitting on the Division's edge waiting his reemergence from the underworld was as good as hanging a banner. Not that discretion seemed the first response from his cohorts. What had Daskellin been thinking?

And still, when he reached his mansion, his face numbed by the chill wind, he was so preoccupied that he didn't notice that a carriage not his own waited by the stables. The old Tralgu door slave flicked his ears nervously as Dawson approached.

"Welcome home, my lord," the slave said, his silver chain clinking as he made a bow. "A visitor arrived an hour ago, my lord."

"Who?" Dawson said.

"Curtin Issandrian, my lord."

Dawson's heart went tight, his blood suddenly singing through his veins. The cold of the day and the frustration of the meeting fell away. He glanced at Vincen Coe, and the huntsman's expression mirrored his own shock.

"You let him *in*?"

The Tralgu slave bowed his head, an icon of fear and distress.

"The lady insisted, my lord."

Dawson drew his sword and took the front steps three at a time. If Issandrian had laid hands on Clara, this would be the shortest and bloodiest revolution in the history of the world. Dawson would burn Issandrian's bones in the square and piss on the fire. As he reached the atrium of the house, Coe was at his side.

"Find Clara," Dawson said. "Take her to her rooms, and kill anyone who comes in if they aren't of the household."

Coe nodded once and vanished into the hallways, swift and silent as a breeze. Dawson strode quietly through his own house, sword in hand. He rounded one corner to the gasp of a maid, her eyes wide at sight of the weapon and her master. His dogs found him when he entered the solarium and followed behind him, whining and growling.

He found Issandrian in the western sitting room, gazing into the fire grate. The man's unfashionably long hair spilled out over his shoulders like a lion's mane, the red-gold of it taking color from the flames. Issandrian noticed the sword and lifted his eyebrows, but made no other move.

"Where is my wife?" Dawson asked, and behind him his dogs growled.

"I couldn't say," Issandrian said. "I haven't seen her since she brought me here to await your return."

Dawson narrowed his eyes, his senses straining for some sign of duplicity. Issandrian glanced at the dogs baring their teeth, then up at Dawson. There was no fear in his expression.

"I can wait here a bit longer if you'd like to speak with her first."

"What do you want here?"

"The good of the kingdom," Issandrian said. "We're men of the world, Lord Kalliam. We both know where the path we're on leads."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Everyone says it. It's Issandrian's cabal against Kalliam's, with King Simeon flapping in between depending on which way the wind blows."

"No one talks about his majesty that way to me."

"May I stand, Lord Kalliam? Or does your honor call for you to set your dogs on an unarmed man?"

The weariness in Issandrian's voice gave Dawson pause. He sheathed his sword and gestured once to the dogs. They cringed back, quieting. Issandrian stood. He was a taller man than Dawson had remembered. Confident, at ease, and more regal than King Simeon. God help them all.

"May we at least talk of truce?" he asked.

"If you have something to say, say it," Dawson said.

"Very well. The world is changing, Lord Kalliam. Not just here. Hallskar is on the edge of calling their king down from his throne and electing a new one. Sarakal and Elassae have both given concessions to merchants and farmers. The power of nobility for its own sake is passing, and for Antea to be a part of the coming age, we must change as well."

"I've heard that song. I didn't like the tune."

"It doesn't matter whether we like it or not. It's happening. And we can act on it or else try to fence out the tide."

“So your farmer’s council has all been a selfless action for the benefit of the crown, has it? Your own aggrandizement has nothing to do with it? Pull the other one, boy. It has bells on it.”

“I can make it yours,” Issandrian said. “If I gave sponsorship over the farmer’s council to you, would you take it?”

Dawson shook his head.

“Why not?” Issandrian asked.

Dawson turned and pointed to the dogs sitting nervously behind him.

“Look at them, Issandrian. They’re good animals, yes? Excellent in their ways. I’ve cared for each of them since they were pups. I see them fed. I give them shelter. Sometimes I let them rest on my couch and keep my feet warm. Should I dress them in my clothes and give them seats at my table?”

“Men aren’t dogs,” Issandrian said, crossing his arms.

“Of course they are. Three years ago a man working my land stole into his neighbor’s house in the night, killed his neighbor, raped the wife, and beat the children. Now, would you have had me give the bastard a place on the judge’s bench? A voice in his own punishment? Or should I nail his hands and cock to a log and throw him in the river?”

“That isn’t the same thing.”

“It is. Men, women, dogs, and kings. We all have our places. My place is in court, following the voice and law of the throne. A farmer’s place is on a farm. If you tell a pig keeper he deserves a chair in court, you put the order of society itself in question, including my right to pass judgment on his actions. And once we’ve lost that, Lord Issandrian, we’ve lost everything.”

“I think you’re wrong,” Issandrian said.

“You tried to have me killed in the street,” Dawson said. “I don’t have any concern to spare for what you think.”

Issandrian pressed a palm to his eyes and nodded. He looked pained.

“That was Maas. It may not matter to you, but I didn’t hear of it until it happened.”

“I don’t care.”

The two men went quiet. In the grate, the fire murmured. The dogs shifted, uneasy but unsure what they were expected to do.

“Is there no way to bridge this?” Issandrian asked, but the hardness of his voice meant he knew the answer.

“Surrender your plans and intentions. Scatter your cabal. Give me Feldin Maas’s head on a pike and his lands to my sons.”

“No, then,” Issandrian said with a smile.

“No.”

“Will your honor permit me safe passage out of your house?”

“My honor requires it,” Dawson said. “Unless you touched my wife.”

“I came to talk,” Issandrian said. “I never meant her harm.”

Dawson stepped to the far side of the room and snapped his fingers, calling the dogs out of his enemy’s path. Issandrian paused in the doorway.

“Believe what you will, I am loyal to the crown.”

“And yet you’re making friends in Asterilhold.”

“And you’re talking with Northcoast,” he said, and then he was gone.

Dawson sat down. The leader of his pack came whining and pressing her head into his hand. He scratched her ears absently. When he was certain he’d given the man time enough to leave the house, he rose and walked to Clara’s private rooms. She sat on the edge of her daybed, her hands knotted on her lap. Her eyes were wide and her face pale. Everything about her spoke of fear and tension.

“Where’s Coe?” he said. “I sent him to—”

Clara raised an arm, gesturing behind him. Coe stood in the shadow behind the open door. The huntsman had a bared sword in one hand, a vicious curved dagger in the other. If Dawson had been an attacker, he’d never have known what killed him.

“Well done,” he said. In the dimness, it was hard to tell whether Coe blushed. Dawson nodded to the doorway, and closed it behind the huntsman when he was gone.

“I am so sorry, dear,” Clara said. “The footman brought word that Lord Issandrian was here, and I didn’t even think. I just had them make him comfortable. I couldn’t imagine leaving him to sit on the step like a delivery boy, and I thought if he needed to speak to you, then perhaps it would be best if he did. I never thought that he might have designs…”

“He didn’t,” Dawson said. “Not this time. If he comes back, though, don’t let him in. Or any of Maas’s people.”

“I have to see Phelia if she comes. I can’t simply pretend she doesn’t exist.”

“Not even her, love. After it’s over. Not now.”

Clara wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. The gesture was unladylike, unplanned, and broke Dawson’s heart a little. He squeezed her knee, trying to impart some comfort.

“Has it gotten worse, then?” she asked.

“Issandrian’s gathering soldiers. Cunning men. It may come to blood.”

Clara took a long breath, the air curling slowly out her nostrils.

“Very well, then.”

“Everyone claims to have Simeon’s best interests, but God help us if

someone should arrive who has the boldness to actually lead. Asterilhold and Northcoast are lining up to buy both sides, and either one would be as happy to see their puppet on the Severed Throne," Dawson said. He coughed. "We have to win this while it's still our war."

Geder

Ariot?" Geder said, his heart sinking. "Why's there a riot?"

"People are going hungry, Lord Protector," Sir Gospey Allintot said. "The farmers have been taking all their grain to Newport."

Geder pressed a hand to his chin, determined to keep Sir Allintot from seeing that he was trembling. He'd been told, of course, something about farmers and grain shipments, but in the thousand different things that administering the city required, it hadn't stood out. Now angry voices roared one against the other until it sounded like a bonfire in the square beyond his windows. Someone was plotting against Vanai, an enemy out of the shadows weakening the fabric of the city. Maccia, perhaps, preparing to retake the city before Antea could solidify its claims. Or the exiled prince gathering allies throughout the countryside. Geder's thoughts whirled and skittered ahead of themselves, dry leaves driven by wind.

"Who's behind it?" he asked, forcing himself to sound calm.

Sir Allintot cleared his throat.

"I believe it's in reaction to your increasing the grain import tax, my lord," Allintot said. "The farmers make more coin for their grain, even though it means traveling farther, because the Newport tax rates are lower."

"So in order to make more money, they'll let Vanai starve?" Geder said. "That won't stand. We can send men out. Intercept the grain and bring it here."

Sir Allintot cleared his throat again. Either the man was getting sick, or he was struggling to hide laughter.

"All respect, my lord," Allintot said. "Even if we put all other things equal, riots are rarely solved by taking troops away from the city. Perhaps my lord might consider reducing the taxes to their previous level. Or, given the gravity of the city's supplies, slightly lower."

"And reduce the amount we have for the crown?" Geder said.

"Again, all respect, my lord. As long as no grain comes to Vanai, no grain taxes do either. The payments are already short of your stated marks."

The shouts from the square swelled. Geder jumped up from his seat and stalked to the window.

"God damn it. Why can't they be *quiet*?"

They swarmed at the steps leading up to the palace. Two or three hundred people, waving fists and stones and sticks. Two dozen men in

Antean armor held firm, blades at the front, bows at the rear. Geder saw Jorey Kalliam pacing among the soldiers. The mob surged forward a few steps, then fell back.

"I'll talk to them," Geder said.

"My lord?"

"Tell them I'm coming out," Geder said. "I'll explain the problem, and tell them that I'll fix it."

"As you wish, my lord," Sir Allintot said, and bowed before he left the room.

Geder had the servants bring the black cloak he'd taken in lieu of taxes. The creak and smell of the leather left him feeling more confident, and the cut really was quite good. It occurred to him, as he descended the wide, polished wood stairs and walked across the wide hall, that he wore the cloak much the way he'd have worn a mask. Because it was well made and impressive, he hid in it, hoping people would see it and not him.

At his nod, two nervous Timzinae servant girls pulled the doors open, and Geder walked out. The soldiers guarding the palace doors seemed more exposed, now that he was standing behind them instead of looking down from above. The mob seemed larger. The crowd saw him, caught its breath, and screamed. Sticks and fists pumped in the air. Hundreds of faces looked up at him, mouths square and teeth showing. Geder swallowed and walked forward.

"What are you doing?" Jorey Kalliam said.

"It's all right," Geder said, and raised his hands, commanding silence. "Listen! Listen to me!"

The first stone seemed like a cunning man's trick. A dark spot against the sky, smaller than a bird, it rose from the back of the mob and seemed to hang in the air, motionless. It was only in the last few feet that the illusion broke and it sped toward Geder's face. The impact knocked him back, the world going quiet and distant for a moment, the daylight growing dusky at the edges of his vision. Then the air itself was roaring, the crowd surging forward. The voice that rose over the chaos was Jorey Kalliam's.

"Loose bows! Hold position!"

An arrow passed over Geder from the square, loose fletching buzzing. It struck the wall of the palace and shattered. Someone took his elbow and pulled him up the stairs. The left side of his face tingled, and he tasted blood.

"Get inside, and stay there," Jorey shouted. "Don't go near the windows."

"I won't," Geder said, and another stone sang past him. He hunched forward, running for the safety of walls around him. As soon as he was through the doors, the slaves closed them and dropped a wooden bar

across a set of interior braces. Geder sat on the stairs, arms around his knees, as the shouts from the square became screams. Something loud happened, and a woman's voice rose in a shriek. He found he was rocking back and forth and made himself stop. His squire appeared at his side, a damp cloth in hand, to wash the blood off Geder's face.

After what seemed hours and was likely only minutes, the sounds of violence faded. When the silence had gone long enough, he gestured to the slaves. The doors were unbarred, and Geder peeked out. Only Antean soldiers stood in the square now. Five bodies lay at the foot of the palace stairs, their blood obscenely bright in the midday sun. The archers still held their places, arrow at the ready, but not yet drawn. Jorey Kalliam stood in the center of the square, half a dozen swordsmen about him. Geder could hear the snap and rhythm of his syllables without making out individual words. Geder turned away and walked back up to his private rooms. Someone had managed to loft a stone high enough to shatter one of the windows. The shards glittered in the sunlight.

It wasn't how things were supposed to go. He had been given the chance to make his name, and he was failing. He didn't even understand how he was failing, only that decisions he made spawned two more problems that were each twice as bad as the first. He knew that the soldiers didn't respect him. That the citizens of the city despised him. He knew too little to run a city with the complexity of Vanai by himself, and he didn't have enough allies to do it for him. He wanted Ternigan to call him home the way he had Klin. Being called to account—even to be condemned—would be better than staying here.

Except, of course, that he could already see the disappointment in his father's expression. Could already hear the falsely bluff consoling words. *You did your best, my boy. I'm still proud of you.* In his imagination, his father tried to protect Geder from the shame of failure. Anything would be better than that. Death at the hands of an angry rabble would be better. Geder's own humiliations ached, but he could endure them. To watch his father humiliated as well would be too much. There had to be a way. There *had* to.

A servant girl came in with a brush and dustpan and cleared away the broken glass. Geder barely looked at her. The air that seeped in through the broken pane was chilly, but he didn't call for anyone to repair the window. He had his leather cloak on. He was warm enough. And if he wasn't, it hardly mattered.

The light shifted along the wall, reddening as the sun completed its arc. A Firstblood man came in, hesitated, and then remade the fire in the grate. Geder's legs ached, but he didn't move. The same man returned a short time later with a sheet of leather that he tied over the

broken window. The room grew darker.

It was unfair that Ternigan wouldn't pay the price of this. He was the one who'd put Geder in command without the guidance or loyal men to back him. If anyone deserved to be shamed over the state of things in Vanai it was the Lord Marshal. But of course, that would never happen. Because if Ternigan deserved blame for putting his faith in Geder, then King Simeon would deserve blame for naming Ternigan to command. No, the blame would be Geder's to eat, and Geder's alone.

Still, he couldn't imagine what Ternigan had been thinking. Everyone had been dumbfounded by the appointment. Even Geder himself had needed Jorey Kalliam's insight to find a plausible reason for the elevation. No one had thought the choice wise. The only two who'd had any faith in it at all were Geder and Lord Ternigan. They were the only two men who'd thought it possible, and even then…

Or perhaps not. What if *no one* had thought it possible? Not even from the start.

"Oh," Geder said to the empty room.

When he turned, his knees buckled. He had stood unmoving for too long. He limped to the couch nearest the fire, his mind turned the problem over of its own accord. How many times had he heard it said that Vanai was a small piece played in a much larger game? And he hadn't understood until now.

First point: as much as it stung to admit, Geder was in no sense equipped to manage the city.

Second point: Ternigan had put him in control of it.

Third: Ternigan was not a fool.

Therefore Ternigan—for whatever reasons and by whatever conflict of loyalties—*wanted* Vanai to fall into chaos. Geder was an acceptable sacrifice.

When he smiled, his injured lip split again. When he laughed, it bled.

Your Majesty, the letter began, *in my role as Protector of Vanai, I have been forced to conclude that the political environment within the greater court makes long-term control of the city impossible.*

Geder ran his eyes down the page again. He'd written half a dozen versions of the thing in the course of the night. Some had been angry screeds, others abject apologies. The form he'd finally adopted was modeled closely on a letter sent by Marras Toca to the king of Hallskar several centuries earlier. The full text was reproduced in one of his books, and the rhetoric of it was both moving and understated. Geder had changed enough to clear his conscience of any taint of plagiarism,

and still the structure of the thing shone through. Geder sewed the letter, marked the exterior page, and pressed his seal of office into the purple wax. The essay with Marras Toca's letter rested on the table, and Geder paged through it again, his heart lighter than it had been in weeks. He found the passage he was looking for, and paused to underline the critical phrase.

… the destruction of Aastapal was done by Inys as a tactical gambit to keep it from Morade's control…

The notation in his own handwriting caught his eye. *Looking at ripples to know where the stone fell.*

Oh yes. Once he'd gone back to Camnipol, there would be time for that. Alan Klin might not realize that he'd lost his protectorate by betrayal. Geder, on the other hand, was perfectly aware of it, and he cast his grudges in iron. He would understand Ternigan's decision and all that lay behind it. But that would come later.

The night had been a trial. The long dark hours had been filled with his mind's constant drumbeat of how he had been used. How he had been created as a failure, and what the price of it would be. He had wept and he had raged. He'd read his books and the reports of his men and the history of Vanai. Briefly, he'd even slept.

"My lord," his squire said. "You called for me?"

"Yes," Geder said, rising to his feet. "There are three things. First, take this letter and find the fastest rider we have. I want this in Camnipol as soon as it can be accomplished."

"Yes, my lord."

"Second, take that purse there. You know the scholar I've been working with? Buy all the books he has. Then bring them back here and pack them with my things. We'll be leaving Vanai, and I'll have them with me."

"Leaving, my lord?"

"Third, send word to my secretaries. I will meet with them in an hour. Any man who comes late, I'll have whipped. Tell them so. Whipped and salt poured on the wounds."

"Y-yes, my lord."

Geder smiled, and it hurt less now. His squire bobbed a quick bow and scurried out. Yawning and stretching, Geder left his rooms in the palace of the prince of Vanai for the last time. His step was light, his mood undiminished by a night without rest. The air smelled of the subtle promise of spring, and the thin light of morning spilled across the stones where the rioters had been the day before. At the far end of the square, some daring local had hung an effigy of Geder. The dummy had an immense belly, a black cloak that mirrored his, and an expression on the dried gourd of a head that was a masterwork of idiocy. A sign hung around the thing's neck: FEED US OR FREE US. Geder

nodded at his other self, a brief and uncharitable salute.

His men sat in the same seats where he'd first addressed them. Many looked tousled from sleep. Jorey Kalliam was among them, his brow set in furrows. Gospey Allintot stood at the rear, his arms crossed and his chin held high. He likely thought he was going to be called to account for the previous day's riot. Geder stepped to the front of the former chapel. He didn't sit.

"My lords," he said sharply. "I apologize for the hour, but I thank you for coming. As Lord Protector, it is my duty and privilege to command you all in this, our final day in the city of Vanai."

He stood for a moment, letting the words sink in. Eyes brightened. Confusion softened the frowns and loosened the necks. Geder nodded.

"By nightfall, you will have your men outside the city gates and prepared for the march to Camnipol," Geder said. "I understand food is somewhat scarce, so be sure that gets packed before we pile on any last looting. This isn't a sack."

"Then what it is?" Alberith Maas said.

"Don't interrupt me again, Maas. I'm still in charge here. Sir Allintot, if you would be so good as to see that the canals are shut? We'll leave those beds dry, I think. And the street gates will need to be shut."

"Which street gates?"

"The iron ones at the street mouths," Geder said.

"Yes, sir. I know them. I meant which of them did you want shut."

"All of them. Lord Kalliam, I would have you guard the city gates. No one comes into the city, and no one besides ourselves leaves it. It is very important that no one escape."

"We're leaving?" Maas said.

"I have been forced to conclude," Geder said, "that the political environment within the greater court makes long-term control of the city impossible. You've all seen Sir Klin's best efforts, and what they came to. I've read the histories of Vanai. Do you all know how many times it's been Antean? Seven. The longest was for ten years during the reign of Queen Esteya the Third. The shortest was three days during the Interregnum. In every case, the city had been given away by treaty or sacrificed in pursuit of some other goal. Which is to say, Vanai has been lost to politics. Given the situation in Camnipol, we are in the path to do so again."

"What does *he* know about the situation in Camnipol?" someone muttered loud enough for Geder to hear, but not so loudly he couldn't pretend otherwise.

"My duty as Protector of Vanai is not to the city itself, but to Antea. If I thought our continued presence here would benefit the crown, I would stay, and so would all of you. But if the history books show

anything, it's that this city has cost good and noble men their lifeblood with no lasting advantage to the Severed Throne, no matter who was seated there at the time. In my role as assigned me by Lord Ternigan in the name of King Simeon, I have determined that Vanai cannot be profitably held. I've written as much to King Simeon. The courier with my justification of these orders is already on the dragon's roads for Camnipol."

"So we just walk away home?" Maas said. There was outrage in his voice. "We hand it over to whichever of our enemies happens by?"

"Of course not," Geder said. "We burn it."

Vanai died at sundown.

If the people had known, if they had understood the threat, the little riot in the square before the palace would have been nothing. But despite the emptying of the canals, the wood and coal and oil spread through the streets and squares, and the arming of the gates, they couldn't imagine that they faced anything more than retaliation for a stone thrown at Geder's head. Likely some rioters would be caught and burned. They wouldn't be the first public executions that Vanai had seen. It was only when the Anteans marched through the gates that the city understood what was happening, and by then it was too late.

History had turned against Vanai. It was a city of narrow streets, of timber waterproofed with oils, of gates at every street mouth. It was smug, and certain that no lasting harm could come to it because none had before. It was the small piece in a much larger game.

Geder sat on a small dais that Sir Alan Klin had left behind. The seat was a leather sling, and a bit narrow for him, but more comfortable than his own field chair. The highest-ranked of his staff stood around him.

He'd rehearsed this moment in his mind. Once it was done, he would stand up, announce that he deemed Vanai no longer in need of protection, and give the order to march. It would be like something from the old epics. Around him, the officers fidgeted, glancing at him as if they weren't sure he really meant to go through with it.

A hundred yards before him, the gates of Vanai closed, glowing gold from the setting sun. Geder rose to his feet.

"Block the gates," he said.

The order went out, seeming to echo and grow as it passed from caller to caller. The sound would soon reach the southern gates as well. The engineers had been waiting, and they sprang into action. It took less than a minute for the great gates to be disabled. It wouldn't have been long work to force them open, but still longer than Vanai

had remaining.

"Loose the fire arrows," Geder said, almost conversationally.

The order went out. Twenty archers lit their arrows and lifted their bows, the streaks of flame little more than fireflies in the light. Then again, and twice more. All around the city, archers wearing his colors would be doing the same as the order reached them. Geder sat down. In his imagination, it had all happened at once, but the sun slipped down below the horizon, the golden world fading to grey, and no particular sign of fire came. Geder was wondering whether he should have the archers try again when he saw the first trail of smoke rise. As he watched, it spread, but slowly. This might take longer than he'd thought.

The smoke thickened, and when the breeze turned toward him it was close and greasy. An answering tower of smoke rose in the south, the blackness rising so high in the air that it caught the last light of the sun, flaring red for a moment, and then dark again. Geder shifted in his seat. It was getting cold, but he didn't want to call for his jacket. He hadn't slept since the night before last, and he could feel the fatigue tugging at him. He forced himself to sit upright.

For a long time, nothing seemed to happen. Some smoke. The sound of distant voices. Geder didn't think that the fire, once started, could be easily put out, but perhaps. The smoke spread, widening its grasp on the night city. And then, as if coming to itself, fire claimed the city.

The screaming began, voices shrieking and wailing. He'd expected to hear something, of course, but he'd thought it would be like the riot that had disturbed him—God, had it only been the day before? This was a different beast. There was no anger in the sound, only hundreds of voices of raw animal panic. Geder saw movement from his own troops. Someone had slipped out of the city, and the swordsmen of Antea, true to their orders, hunted the refugees down. Geder touched his lip, worrying at the cut. He reminded himself of the effigy hung in the square. They'd started this. It wasn't his fault they were dying now.

Smoke billowed up from the streets now, lit from beneath and blocking out the moon. Flames crawled up the buildings nearest the wall and leapt up, leaving the city below and burning in the free air. Another sound, low and steady as an army on the march, came. Geder felt the ground shudder, and looked around for a landslide or an attack. For a moment, he imagined it was some last dragon, hidden under Vanai and disturbed into waking. But it was only the voice of the fire.

The gates shuddered, warping from the heat. A group of figures appeared on the wall, men and women trying to flee. In a moment as clear and sudden as a lightning strike, one in particular was

silhouetted by the flames. Geder could tell that she was a woman, but not what race she was. She waved her arms, trying to communicate something. He had the sudden, powerful urge to send someone to her, to save her, but already she was gone. Some tendril of flame reached the near-empty granaries, and the stirred grain dust detonated like a thunderclap. Smoke rose whirling, a vortex of darkness that dwarfed the city. The wind that pushed past him was the draw of the flames. The roar was too loud to speak over.

Geder sat, eyes wide, as bits of ash rained down around him. The heat of the dying city pressed against his face like the desert sun. He'd imagined himself sitting there, watching until it was done. He hadn't understood that Vanai would burn for days.

He hadn't understood *anything*.

"Let's go," he said. No one heard him. "It's enough! Let's go!"

The order went out, and the army of Antea pulled back from the furnace. Geder abandoned the thought of his grand rhetorical gesture. Nothing he could say would measure up to the conflagration. He went back to his tent, wondering if they were camped too close. What if the fire broke through the walls? What if it came for him?

He waved his squire away and curled up on the cot. He was too tired to move, and the nightmare howl of the flames wouldn't stop. He stared at the top of his tent, seeing the small figure waving her arms and dying. Geder pressed his hand to his mouth, biting at the skin until it bled, trying to make the noise go away.

The smoke of ten thousand people rose into the sky.

CITHRIN

Word of the destruction of Vanai washed over Porte Oliva. In the Grand Market and at the port, in the taprooms and the wayhouses and the steps that led to the brick-and-glass labyrinth that was the governor's palace, detail piled upon detail as reports came in by ship and horse and raw speculation. The city had burned for three days. The Antean forces had barred the gate and slaughtered anyone who tried to escape. The canals had been drained so that there would be no water to slow the fire. The Anteans had poured barrels of lamp oil in the streets before they left. The heat had shattered stones. The smoke had carried the smell of burning as far as Maccia and turned the sunsets red. Charred bodies were still clogging the weirs at Newport.

Cithrin grabbed at each rumor like one of the ever-present beggars watching for dropped coins. At first, she hadn't believed it. Cities didn't die overnight. The streets and canals she'd known all her life couldn't become ruins just because someone said it, even if the man speaking was an Antean general. It was ridiculous. But with every retelling, every new voice that said the same things, her incredulity faded. Even if they were all only echoing one another, the weight of their combined belief pulled her along.

Vanai was dead.

"Are you all right?" Sandr asked.

Cithrin leaned forward, her legs swinging from the side of the actors' cart like a child sitting on too high a stool. Around them, the midday crowd shuffled. She watched a reed-thin Cinnae boy thread himself through the press of bodies, following the colorless thatch of his hair. The smell of the sea brine made the air feel cooler than it was. She didn't know how to answer, but she tried.

"I don't know. I think so. It's hard to live in the middle of all this," she said, nodding at the press of humanity around them, "and really feel the deaths. I mean, I know that Magister Imaniel is gone. And Cam must be too. All the boys who played in the streets are dead, and that makes me sad sometimes. But when I start thinking that it's *all* gone—the fresh market and the palaces and the flat barges and all of it—it gets… I don't know. Abstract?"

"That's a good word for it," Sandr said, nodding as if he knew what she meant.

"Nobody knows me now. I've lived my whole life in Vanai. It felt like everyone knew who I was. *What* I was. And now that they're all

gone, there's nothing holding me to that anymore. Captain Wester, Yardem Hane, you, and Master Kit's company. You are the people in the world who know me best."

"It's hard," Sandr said, taking her hand.

No, that's the only good part, she thought. *When nobody knows what you are, you can be anything.*

"Sandr!" Master Kit called. "It's time."

"Yes, sir," Sandr said, jumping to his feet. He looked down at Cithrin and smiled gently, much the way he did when he took the stage. "You'll be here when it's done?"

Cithrin nodded. It wasn't as if she had someplace else to be. Besides which, Sandr's sudden change of heart was interesting. She assumed that some more attractive girl had refused him, and he'd fallen back to court her while his confidence healed. He believed, after their moments beside the mill pond, that she was an easy conquest. Cithrin wondered whether she was. More than that, she wondered whether she'd like to be. She slipped off the cart and into the crowd.

Mikel was already there, halfheartedly pretending to be a local. He caught her eyes and grinned. She nodded back, then turned to watch Smit and Hornet lower the stage. When the chains had caught, Master Kit strode out onto the boards. He wasn't wearing his Orcus the Demon King robes anymore. With Opal gone, the story of Aleren Mankiller and the Sword of the Dragons had been set aside. Instead, a shimmering blue cape flowed from the shoulders of a matching tunic. Bright yellow ribbon gartered green hose, and the most ridiculous shoes seen by human eyes bobbled around his toes.

"Hell-*lo*!" Master Kit cried in comic falsetto. "I said, hello there! Yes, you, in that wonderful hat. Why don't you stop for a while. God knows you've nothing better to do. And you, there at the back. Come closer, you might see something you like. What? You might. And—"

Master Kit stopped, his face a mask of shock. Cithrin felt a thrill of fear, half turning to follow his gaze.

"Oh, not you, dear," Master Kit went on in the same false voice, his hand fluttering like a sparrow. "*You* keep right on going."

The crowd laughed. Cithrin and Mikel were meant to lead them, but there were already half a dozen others who had stopped to watch. The Bride's Curse was a comedic sex play with half a dozen costume changes that could be performed with only one woman. Master Kit had changed the traditional lines to match with the specifics of Porte Oliva: the rhymes appealing to the king had all been remade for a queen, and instead of the evil landlord being disguised as a Yemmu with a false shoulder and mouth tusks, Smit jumped onto the stage in a bead-woven sheep pelt as the world's least convincing Kurtadam. Cithrin laughed and clapped, not leading the crowd so much as adding

to its flow.

When the end came and the players took their bows amid a modest shower of coin, she was almost surprised to find herself returned to her own life. Hiding in Porte Oliva, waiting for the next thieves to attack in the night.

And Vanai dead.

Sandr came out from the cart wiping the paint from his face with a damp rag. The smears at his eyes and mouth made him look younger than he was. Or perhaps they made him seem his age, when he usually passed himself as a worn coin.

"Went well," he said through a grin.

"It did," Cithrin agreed.

"Buy you that meal now, if you'd like," he said. Over his shoulder, Cithrin caught a glimpse of Cary scowling at them from the cart and imagined what she would see. Sandr, the leading man. Cithrin, the naïve second-choice girl. Or perhaps Sandr, member of the troupe, and Cithrin, the reason Opal was gone. The pinched lips and furrowed brow could have been disapproval of her or of Sandr. Cithrin didn't know which it was.

Find out, Magister Imaniel said from her memory or else his grave.

Cithrin lifted a hand only as high as her waist, barely a wave. Cary returned it, and then pointed at Sandr and tilted her head. *Really?* If she'd been angry about Opal, at most she would have smiled and waved. Surprised by relief, Cithrin shrugged. Cary rolled her eyes and went back into the cart.

"What?" Sandr said, looking over his shoulder. "Did I miss something?"

"Just Cary," Cithrin said. "You said something about a meal?"

The taproom nearest her rooms served plates of chicken and pickled carrots that they claimed went well with the dark beer. Sandr paid five extra coins for the privilege of a private table with a single bench, kept apart from the commons by a draped cloth too humble to be called a curtain. He slid onto the bench at her side, with a tankard of black beer and a wide mug of fortified wine for her. His leg settled easily beside hers, as if the touch were perfectly normal. Cithrin considered shifting to leave a few inches between them. Instead, she drank a generous mouthful of the wine, enjoying the bite of it. Sandr smiled and sipped at his own beer.

This was, she realized, a negotiation. He wanted to do some of the things he'd just finished mocking in the sex play, and he in turn was willing to offer up food and alcohol, attention and sympathy. And, whether he knew it or not, experience. Implicit exchange was something Magister Imaniel had talked about several times, and always with disdain. He'd liked the precision of measuring coin. Here,

in the warmth of the taproom, the tastes of salted meat and fortified wine warming her blood, Cithrin wasn't sure she agreed. Surely imprecision had its place.

"I'm sorry about Vanai," Sandr said, using the same gambit he'd tried before the play.

Now what was the effect of saying that? Reminding her how badly she needed reassurance and the feeling of connection, she supposed. Making the things he offered seem valuable. Still, he'd made that point earlier. Stating it again was a mistake. Maybe if he'd interspersed it with other tactics. He could devalue her side of the exchange. If, for instance he'd criticized her dress or the cut of her hair, making it clear that lying down at her side wasn't likely worth so much. The danger there being that she might take offense and end the negotiation. Or pretend offense as a way of forcing him to raise his offer.

"Cithrin?" he said, and she shook herself.

"I'm sorry," she said. "My mind was elsewhere."

"The beer's good. Have you been here before?"

"I've meant to," she said. "Something's always come up."

"Want some?"

"All right," she said.

She'd expected him to pass his tankard to her, but instead he lifted his arm, calling over the server, and bought a tankard just for her. It was complex and thick, the alcohol lurking in a rich play of flavors. It didn't have the astringent cleanness of the fortified wine. How had Captain Wester put it? *Get her stupid drunk to get her knees apart.* Something like that.

It occurred to her that Sandr wasn't a man with a wide variety of strategies.

"I don't remember my parents," Cithrin said. "The bank raised me, bought my clothes and tutors."

"You must have loved them," Sandr said, playing the part of the consoler with his voice and pressing his thigh against hers with just a bit more fervor. Still, Cithrin considered the question.

Had she loved Magister Imaniel? She supposed so. She'd certainly loved Cam and wanted Besel. She'd wept for them all when the first news came. But she wasn't weeping now. The grief was still with her, but there was something else beside it. A terrible sense of possibility.

"I suppose I must," she said.

He took her hand, as if in sympathy. His brow furrowed and he leaned toward her.

"I'm so sorry, Cithrin," he said, and to her amazement, tears came to her eyes. That couldn't be right.

Sandr leaned forward, dabbing gently at her eyes with the cuff of

his sleeve. Washing away the tears he had called forth. The stab of resentment at the little hypocrisy clarified many questions.

"Captain Wester!" she gasped, and Sandr dropped her hand like it had bit him. He glanced out from behind the almost-curtain.

"Where?" he said.

"He just stepped into the other room," Cithrin said. "Go, Sandr. Before he sees you!"

Sandr swallowed, nodded once, and slipped off the bench, heading for the alley door. Cithrin watched him go, then reached over and pulled his tankard to her as well. The chicken did go well with it after all. As she drank, her mind wandered. She wasn't angry at Sandr, but she couldn't bring herself to respect him. On another night, she might have let his scene play out, if only to see where it led. But it was increasingly clear that Master Kit intended to remain in Porte Oliva for some time. Since she wasn't sure when or how she'd depart the city, making that kind of connection was sure to complicate things. And then what if she got pregnant? Everything would fall apart then. Easier to stay out than to get out later. Still, she did wonder what it would have been like. Her mind shifted back to the mill pond, the snow against her skin, the weight of the boy upon her.

She finished the second beer and went back to the fortified wine. Alcohol was supposed to soften the mind, but she didn't feel soft at all. Or at least not in a way that left her unaware. She was more relaxed, certainly. The ever-present knot in her gut was looser, and she felt more at home in her skin. But her thinking was as clear as ever. Maybe clearer. She had the sense of huge thoughts shifting just beneath her awareness, her mind comparing and scheming with a speed and elegance that she couldn't quite keep up with herself. She ate some of the pickled carrots, finished the wine, and got another tankard of the beer.

When she stepped out the door, the sun had already set. Porte Oliva lounged in the grey twilight. Lanterns flickered and glowed. Men and women scurried through the streets, anxious to get home before twilight had entirely faded. The air was cold but not bitter. This wasn't a mild winter evening so much as a chilly springtime. She let herself drift down the street, her mind plucking at thoughts, turning them over, and dropping them again. How old Sandr seemed on the stage, and how young off it. The emptiness in her heart that was the death of Magister Imaniel and Cam, the almost vertiginous need to fill it, and her almost clinical detachment from her pain. The impending trip to Carse, smuggling wealth she hadn't stolen. The books of the bank records, sums and ciphers tracing history from the foundational document to the last rush of fleeing aristocracy. Opal's betrayal and Captain Wester's loyalty. She remembered something Master Kit had

said about the shape of Wester's soul, and wondered what shape her own soul might take.

A Cinnae woman hurried past, her robes wrapped with pink-and-orange gauze, her face pale as the moon. A dog barked from the shadowed mouth of an alleyway. Three Kurtadam men walked past her, beads clicking and jingling in their pelts, said something she didn't understand, and then laughed together. She ignored them. The glow of her own windows shone just up ahead. If anyone were to attack her now, she'd only have to call out and Captain Wester and Yardem Hane would come. It was a pleasant thought, and enough to make her feel safe whether she was or not.

She pulled herself up the stairs to the steady creaking of Captain Wester's pacing footsteps. She opened the door to his scowl.

"You've been out for quite a while," he said.

Cithrin shrugged.

"How much have you been drinking?"

Cithrin walked over to the cot and sat beside the Tralgu. Yardem smelled like open fields and damp dogs. She repressed the urge to scratch his wide back. Captain Wester was still looking at her, waiting for an answer.

"I don't recall exactly," she said. "I wasn't paying for most of it."

Wester hoisted an eyebrow.

"The thaw's almost come. We have to make a decision," she said, her words precise and unslurred.

"That's true," the captain said, crossing his arms. The failing daylight from the windows softened the lines of his scowl and the grey at his temples. He looked young. Cithrin remembered that Opal had found the man attractive and wondered whether she did. She'd lived with him for weeks. Months, counting the time on the road. She wondered for the first time whether his mouth would taste like Sandr's, then pulled her mind back to the moment, more than half repulsed by her own musings.

"No matter how we try to reach Carse," she said, "the danger is that someone will kill us and take the money."

"Old news," Captain Wester said.

"So we need to take the money ourselves," she said, understanding as she said it what she'd been considering all night. "We need to use it."

"Probably the wisest thing we could do," the captain said. "Take what we can carry and vanish."

"No," she said. "I mean take all of it."

The Tralgu at her side flicked a jingling ear. Captain Wester licked his lips and looked down.

"If we took all of it, we'd be in the same situation we are now," he

said. “We’d still have to hide the money or protect it. Only we’d have your friends in Carse after our heads. That’s not an improvement. We can talk about this when you’re sober,” he said.

“No, listen to me. We’ve been acting like smugglers. We aren’t. You’ve always said we can’t keep this much money quiet and we can’t keep it safe. Opal proved that. So we shouldn’t keep it quiet.”

Wester and Yardem exchanged a silent glance, and the captain sighed. Cithrin stood and walked across to the unsealed books. Her feet were perfectly steady. Her hands didn’t waver as she pulled out the black leather binding. She opened to the first pages and handed them to the captain.

“Documents of foundation,” she said. “We write up a copy of our own, but for Porte Oliva instead of Vanai. We’ve got a hundred documents with Magister Imaniel’s signature and thumb. We can pick some minor contract and use it to forge letters of foundation. File the documents with the governor, pay the fees and bribes, and then I can invest all of this.”

“Invest it,” the captain said as if she’d said *eat it.*

“The silk and tobacco and spices I can place on consignment. Even if they’re stolen from the merchants, the bank would be paid. We can do the same with the jewelry or sell it outright for funds, and then make loans. Or buy into local businesses. We’ll have to hold back some portion. Five hundredths, perhaps? But with the name of the Medean bank behind me, I could turn over nine-tenths of what we have in this room into papers of absolutely no value to anyone else before the trade ships come from Narinisle. What was left wouldn’t be too tempting to guard.”

“You are very, very drunk,” Wester said. “The way you steal is you take something and then you leave.”

“I’m not stealing it. I’m keeping it safe,” Cithrin said. “This is how banks work. You never keep all the money there to be stolen by whoever finds a way to break your strongbox. You put it out into the world. If you take a loss or someone steals your working funds, you still have all your incomes and agreements. You can recover. And if it all goes wrong, what? We get thrown in prison?”

“Prison is bad,” Yardem rumbled.

“Not as bad as killed and dropped in the sea,” Cithrin said. “If you do what I say, the chances of keeping the money go up and the consequences of failure go down.”

“You want,” Captain Wester said, his voice tight, “to take a great deal of money that isn’t yours and start your own branch of the bank that you’re stealing the money *from*? They’ll come for you.”

“Of course they will,” Cithrin said. “And when they do, I’ll have what’s theirs and more besides. If I’ve done it right.”

Cithrin saw the disbelief in his face wavering on the border between amusement and outrage. She stamped her foot.

"Listen to me," she said. "Listen to my voice, Captain. *I can do this.*"

Marcus

Be careful," Marcus said.

"I am being careful, sir."

"Well, be more careful."

Seven previous attempts lay on the floor between them: contracts and agreements between dead men over burned wealth, meaningless now. But, as Cithrin had said, each of them bore the signature and bloody thumbprint of Magister Imaniel of Vanai. The trick was to dip the parchment into the wax so that it covered the name and thumb, but nothing else. Then the page could be set in a wash of salt and rendered oil to loosen the ink. After a day in the bath, they could use a scrivener's stone to scrape away the ink, then a wash of urine to bleach away any remaining marks. In the end, they would have a blank page, ready to take whatever carefully practiced words Cithrin put on it, already signed and endorsed by the former head of the bank. A man, the story would have it, who foresaw the coming death of his city at Antean hands and concocted a scheme to refound his branch in Porte Oliva with Cithrin as his agent.

Provided they could put the wax in the right spot. Marcus leaned forward, fingers reaching toward the side of the document.

"If you just—"

"Sir?"

"Yardem?"

The Tralgu's ears sloped backward, set so close to his head that the earrings rested on his scalp.

"Go over there, sir."

"But I—"

"Go."

Marcus tapped at the air just before the parchment, grunted, and turned away. The boxes in the small rooms above the gambler's stall had been shifted and rearranged, making what had been one small room into two tiny ones. Outside, a warm spring wind hissed, rattling the shutters and making the world in general seem uneasy and restless. It had been a long time since Marcus had broken the thaw in a southern port, and the rich salt-stink of the bay reminded him of yesterday's fish. Cithrin sat on a stool, dressed in her carter's rough, with Cary squeezed in close beside her. Master Kit stood a few steps away, his arms crossed over his chest.

"That was better," Master Kit said, "but I think you've gone a little

too far in the other direction. I don't want you to seem burdened. Instead of thinking of weight, imagine how you would move in a heavy wool cloak."

Cary put her hand to Cithrin's back.

"You're too tight here," Cary said. "Relax that and put the tension up *here*."

Cithrin frowned, tiny half moons appearing at the corners of her mouth.

"Like your breasts were too heavy," Cary said.

"Oh," Cithrin said, brightening. "Right."

She rose from her stool, took a step toward Master Kit, turned, and sat back down. Marcus couldn't have said what had changed in the way the girl moved, only that it was different. Older. Master Kit and Cary smiled at each other.

"Progress," Master Kit said. "Unquestionable progress."

"I think we're ready to walk down to the square," Cary said.

"With my blessing," Master Kit said, stepping back until he was almost pressed to Marcus's belly. The two women made their way across the thin strip of floor to the head of the stairway, hand in hand.

"Lower in the hips," Master Kit said. "Sink into them. Don't walk from your ankles."

The creak of boards descended until the pair were out in the street and gone. The wind gusted up the stairway, and the door at the bottom slammed shut. Marcus blew out his breath and sat on the newly vacant stool.

"I think she's quite good," Master Kit said. "Not much natural sense of her own body, but no particular fear of it either, and I find that's half the work."

"That's good," Marcus said.

"It seems the cuts on her thumbs are scarring nicely. I expect she'll have a good callus when that's through. Like she's been signing contracts for years. Did you put lye in the wounds?"

"Ash and honey," Marcus said. "Just as good, and it doesn't tend to go septic."

"Fair point. I thought that calling her three-quarters Cinnae was a good choice. If she's nearer full-blood, the Firstblood thickness may read more as years than parentage."

"I've always thought Cinnae look to be about twelve anyway," Marcus said. "Terrible in a fight. No weight behind the blows."

Master Kit leaned a shoulder against the wall. His dark eyes flitted across Marcus as if the actor were reading a book.

"And how are you, Captain?"

"I hate this," Marcus said. "I hate this plan. I hate that we're forging documents. I hate that Cithrin pulled you and yours into it. There's

nothing about the entire scheme I don't hate."

"And yet it seems you've chosen to come along."

"I don't have a better idea," Marcus said. "Except fill our pockets and walk away. That's still got some charm."

"So why don't you do that? The boxes are here. I'd say you've more than earned your pay."

Marcus let out a mirthless chuckle and leaned forward, elbows on his knees. From the far side of the room, Yardem made a satisfied grunt. The wax dip had worked this time.

"There are going to be consequences," Marcus said. "She can't just say it's all hers now and make it true. It's like walking into Cabral and casually announcing that you're the new mayor of Upurt Marion, and all the port taxes go to you now. And what's it going to upset? We don't know. By the end of the season, every trading house and royal court is going to have a theory of what exactly Komme Medean is signaling by investing in Porte Oliva. It's going to mean something about the relationship of Birancour and Cabral, and whether the freight from Qart-hadath is landing here or there. Why isn't there a branch here already? Is it because the queen warned them off? We might be violating half a dozen treaties and agreements right now, and we wouldn't know it."

"I agree with all of that," Master Kit said. "The risk seems real."

"We're about to be the bold, unexpected move on the part of a bank with a great deal of money and influence, and don't think for a moment that they'll appreciate our putting our hand to the tiller."

"And that's why you dislike the plan?"

"Yes," Marcus said.

Master Kit looked down. The wind stilled, then gusted again, pressing against the little rooms and stirring the air.

"Why do you dislike this plan, Captain?" the actor said.

He felt a stab of annoyance, and then the cool, almost sick feeling of the right answer swimming into his mind. He scratched his leg, feeling the tooth of the cloth against his fingertips. His hands seemed older than they should. When he thought of them, they still looked like they had when he'd first been on campaign. Strong, smooth, capable. Now there was as much scar to them as skin. The nail of his right thumb had been cut half off once, and it hadn't grown back quite right. The knuckles were larger than they had been. The calluses had more yellow to them. He turned them over, considering his palms as well. If he looked closely, he could still make out the dots of white where a dog had bitten him once, a lifetime ago.

"She knows the risks, but she doesn't understand them," Marcus said. "I can say everything to her I just said to you, and she'll answer me back. Argument for argument. She'll say the regained capital

justifies the decision. That the holding company isn't liable for her, nor are the other branches, so anything they make back is a step above where they were when the money was simply lost."

"And yet," Master Kit said.

"I know how to protect her from thugs and raiders. I know how to fight pirates. I don't know how to protect her from herself, and hand to God, that girl is the worst danger she'll ever face."

"It can be hard, can't it? Losing control," Master Kit said.

"I don't control her," Marcus said.

"I think you do, but I'm open to being proven wrong. What are three decisions she's made before this? In the time you've known her, I mean."

Yardem Hane loomed up behind the actor, wiping oil from his fingers onto a bit of grey cloth. For a moment, Marcus thought it might offer distraction, but the Tralgu's passive expression told him that he'd come to listen to the conversation, not to end it.

"She got that dress of hers," Marcus said. "And she chose to go to your performances."

"Two, then?" Master Kit said.

"She picked the fish for dinner," Marcus said.

"And how would you compare that with other contracts you've had?" Master Kit asked. "I don't believe you have thought of Cithrin as your employer so much as the little girl who'd swum out near the riptide. Has she paid you?"

"She hasn't," the Tralgu rumbled.

"You can stay out of this," Marcus said. "She couldn't. She didn't have any money of her own. All of this belongs to someone."

"And now," Master Kit said, "it seems she might be able to offer gold. And make decisions of greater weight than whether to have fish or poultry. Or what dress to buy. If this scheme of hers works, she'll be choosing where to live, how and whether to protect herself, and all the other thousand things that come with her trade. And I suspect you'll be here as well, at her side and protecting her. But only as her hired captain."

"Which isn't what I've been doing all along?" Marcus said.

"Which isn't what you've been doing," Master Kit said. "If you had been, you'd have asked Cithrin before you killed Opal."

"She'd have told me not to."

"And I think that's why you didn't ask. And why you dread the time when you have to ask, and you have to defer to her judgment even if you think she's wrong."

"She's a little girl," Marcus said.

"All women were little girls once," Master Kit said. "Cithrin. Cary. The queen of Birancour. Even Opal."

Marcus said something obscene under his breath. Outside in the street, the gambler's man called out. Great fortune could be theirs. Odds offered on any fair wager.

"I am sorry about Opal," Marcus said.

"I know you are," Master Kit said. "I am too. I knew her for a very long time, and I enjoyed her company for more than half of that. But she was who she was, and she made her choices."

"You were her lover, weren't you?" Marcus said.

"Not recently."

"And she was a part of your company. She traveled with you. She was one of your people."

"She was."

"And you let me kill her," Marcus said.

"I did," Master Kit said. "I believe there is a dignity in consequences, Captain. I think there's a kind of truth in them, and I try to cultivate a profound respect for truth."

"Meaning this is Cithrin's mistake to make."

"If that's what you heard me say."

Yardem flicked an ear, his earrings jingling against each other. Marcus knew what the Tralgu was thinking. *She's not your daughter.* Marcus set his foot against the wall of boxes. The wealth of a city that didn't exist anymore. The gems and trinkets, silk and spices traded to let the lucky escape the flames. All of it together wouldn't buy back one of the dead. Not even for a day.

So what was the point of it?

"Her plan isn't bad," Marcus said. "But I have the right to hate it."

"I can respect that position," Master Kit said with a grin. "Shall we prepare the oil bath for the future foundational documents of the Medean bank in Porte Oliva before the women come back?"

Marcus sighed and rose.

When the morning came, Marcus walked beside her. The mornings were still cold, but not so much that he could see his breath. Men and women of the three predominant races of the city passed one another as if the differences in their eyes and builds and pelts were of no particular concern. The morning mist drifted through the great square, greying the dragon's jade pavement. The condemned of the city shivered in the cold where all could see. Two Firstblood men hung as murderers. A Cinnae woman sat in the stocks with chains around her ankles as a recalcitrant debtor. A Kurtadam man hung by his knees and barely able to draw breath. Smuggling. Marcus could feel Cithrin pause. He wondered what the penalty would be for what they were about to do. It seemed unlikely to have precedent in the judges' tables.

The wide copper-and-oak doors of the governor's palace were already open, a stream of humanity pouring in and out from the center of authority. Cithrin lifted her chin. Smit had painted her face before they left. Faint, greyish lines around her eyes. Rose-grey blush coloring her cheeks. She wore a black dress that flattered her hips, but the way a matron might be flattered. Not a girl fresh from her father's home. She could have been thirty. She could have been fifteen. She could have been anything.

"Come with me," she said.

"Don't walk from your ankles," he said, and she slowed, taking the brickwork steps one at a time.

Within the palaces, the sunlight filtered through great walls of colored glass. Red and green and gold spilled across the floors, the twinned stairways. It mottled the skins of the people walking through, leaving Marcus with the sense of being in some enchanted grotto from a children's song, where all the fish had been changed to minor political officials. Cithrin took a long, shuddering breath. For a moment, he thought she would leave. Turn on her heel, flee, and leave the whole mad folly behind. Instead, she stepped forward and put a hand on the arm of a passing Kurtadam woman.

"Forgive me," Cithrin said. "Where would I find the Prefect of Trades?"

"Up the stairs, ma'am," the Kurtadam said with a soft southland lisp. "He'll be a Cinnae like yourself. Green felt table, ma'am."

"My thanks," Cithrin said, and turned toward the stairs. The Kurtadam woman's gaze stayed on Marcus, and he nodded as they passed. As a bodyguard, he felt out of place. There were a few queensmen here, scattered among the crowd, but no other private guards that he could see. He wondered if the real Medean bank would have brought him along or left him outside.

At the top of the stair, Cithrin paused, and he did as well. The prefectures were set haphazardly about the room like a huge child had taken up the tables and scattered them. There were no aisles, no rows. Each table stood at an angle to the ones around it, and if there was a system to the chaos, Marcus couldn't see it. Cithrin nodded to herself, gestured that he should stay close, and waded into the mess. A third of the way across, she came to a table covered with green felt where a Cinnae man in a brown tunic sat paging through stacks of parchment. A small weighing scale perched beside him, a row of weights behind it like soldiers at attention.

"Help you?" he said.

"I've come to submit letters of foundation," Cithrin said. Marcus felt his heart speeding up, like the moments before a battle. He crossed his arms and scowled.

“What class of trade, ma’am?”

“Banking,” Cithrin said, as if she were doing something perfectly normal. The Prefect of Trades looked up as if seeing her for the first time.

“If you mean a gambling house—”

“No,” Cithrin said. “A branch house. The holding company is in Carse. I have the papers, if you’d like.”

She held them out. Marcus was certain he caught a whiff of old urine, that the section of the page that the wax had protected showed three shades darker than the rest. The prefect would laugh, call the queensmen, end the game here before it began.

The Cinnae man took the parchment as if it were spun glass. He frowned, his gaze skipping over the words. He stopped and looked up at Cithrin. His pale face flushed.

“The… the *Medean* bank?” he said. Marcus saw the conversations around them shudder and stop. More eyes were turning their way. The prefect swallowed. “Will this be a restricted license or free?”

“I believe the letter calls for free,” Cithrin said.

“So it does. So it does. A full and unencumbered branch of the Medean bank.”

“Is that a problem?”

“No,” the man said, and fumbled, reading for her name on the papers. “No, Mistress bel Sarcour, only I hadn’t been told to expect it. If the governor knew, he’d have been here.”

“Not called for,” Cithrin said. “Would I pay the fees to you?”

“Yes,” the prefect said. “Yes, that would be fine. Let me just…”

For what felt like a day and likely took less than half an hour, Cithrin fenced with the bureaucrat. Payment was delivered from the bank, assayed, accepted, and receipts issued. The man scribbled a note on a sheet of pink onionskin, pressed an inked signet on the page, signed, and had Cithrin put her name over his signature. Then he offered her a small silver blade. As if she had done it a thousand times before Cithrin cut her thumb and pressed her print onto the page. The prefect did likewise.

And it was done. Cithrin took the onionskin, folded it, and slipped it in the purse that hung from her belt. Marcus followed her back down the stairs and out to the square. The sun had burned off the mist now, and the sounds of human traffic were the same low roar he’d become accustomed to.

“We’re a bank,” Cithrin said.

Marcus nodded. He would have felt better if there had been someone to fight. Or at least threaten. The anxiety of what they’d just done wanted some release. Cithrin took a handful of coins from her purse and held them out to him.

“Here,” she said. “That’s to hire on more guards. Now that it’s my money, we might as well spend it. I’m thinking a dozen men, but use your best judgment. We’ll want day and night guards, and then a few to accompany goods when we transfer them. I didn’t haul these silks all the way from the Free Cities to have some back-alley thief take them now. I’ve got my eye on a couple of places the bank might operate from that give a better impression than squatting over a gambling shop.”

Marcus looked at the coins. They were the first she’d ever paid him, and so what she’d just said was her first true order. The warmth in his chest was as surprising as it was powerful.

However it unfurled from this, whatever the consequences, the girl had done what damn few would have had the nerve for. This from the half-idiot carter boy he’d met in Vanai last autumn.

He was proud of her.

“Is there a problem?” Cithrin asked, real concern in her voice.

“No, ma’am,” Marcus said.

Dawson

Issandrian's parade began at the edge of the city, snaked through the low market, then north along the broad king's road, past the gates of the Kingspire, and then east to the stadium. The broad streets teemed with the subjects of King Simeon, sworn loyalists of the Severed Throne, all standing on their toes to catch a glimpse of the slave races arrived to turn Antea into the puppet of Asterilhold. The roar of the assembled voices was like the surf, and the smell of their bodies threatened to overwhelm the gentle scents of springtime. Some follower of Issandrian's cabal had paid the rabble to carry banners and signs celebrating the games and Prince Aster. From where Dawson sat, he saw one—beautiful blue-dyed cloth with the prince's name in letters of silver—held aloft on poles, but with the wrong side up. It was Issandrian's revolt in a nutshell: the words of nobility hefted by men who couldn't read them.

The noble houses had their viewing platforms set in order and position according to the status of each family's blood. The place each man stood told where he put his allegiance. The state of the court as a whole could be read in a glance, and it wasn't a pleasant sight. Banner colors from a dozen houses fluttered about king and prince, and more of them belonged to Issandrian's cabal than not. Even Feldin Maas's grey and green. King Simeon sat high above it all, dressed in velvet and black mink, and managed to smile despite what was before him.

A column of Jasuru archers marched through the streets, the bronze scales of their skins oiled and glittering like metal in the sun. They carried the stripped-hide banners of Borja. Dawson made a rough count. Two dozen, say. He noted it down as the archers paused before the royal stand and saluted King Simeon and his son. Prince Aster returned the gesture with the same wide grin that he had each company before and would each one still to come.

"Issandrian's a cruel bastard," Dawson said. "If you've come to steal the boy's place, you should have the dignity not to put ribbons on it."

"For God's sake, Kalliam, don't say that sort of thing where people might hear you," Odderd Faskellan said. Behind them, Canl Daskellin chuckled.

On the road, five Yemmu lumbered. Their jaw tusks were dyed improbable colors of green and blue, and they towered over the watching crowd of Firstbloods. They didn't seem to have armor or weapons apart from the freakish size of their race. The five stopped

before the king and made their salute. Prince Aster returned it, and one of the Yemmu men lifted his voice in a rolling, barbaric call. The others joined in, one voice layering over the other until the sounds seemed to braid. A soft breeze tugged at Dawson's cloak, and the trees that lined the street bobbed and shuddered. The air called in from all directions. The voices deepened, and the Yemmu at the center of the pack lifted a great, meaty fist. They were whipped by the tiny whirlwind.

Cunning men, then. Dawson made a note.

"Do you think the blow will come before the games commence?" Daskellin asked as if wondering aloud about the chance of rain.

"There doesn't have to be a blow, does there?" Odderd asked.

"More likely during," Dawson said. "But anything's possible."

"Reconsider Paerin Clark's offer," Daskellin said.

"I will not," Dawson said.

"We have to. Or aren't you seeing the same display I am? If we're standing against this, we need allies. And, frankly, gold. Do you have a way to get them? Because as it happens, I *do*."

A troop of swordsmen marched past. Fifty of them, all in the bright-burnished armor of Elassae, and evenly divided between black-scaled Timzinae and wide-eyed Southling. Cockroaches and night-cats. Races created in slavery to serve their dragon masters, marching into the center of Firstblood power.

"If we can't win as Anteans, we deserve to lose," Dawson said.

The shocked silence behind him meant he'd gone too far. He noted the swordsmen.

"I began this because I believed you were right, old friend," Daskellin said. "I didn't say I'd crawl into your grave."

"Something—" Odderd began, but Dawson ignored him.

"If we win this by putting ourselves out to bid, we're no better than Maas or Issandrian or Klin. So yes, Canl, I will go to my grave for Antea. And with one loyalty. Not so many hundredths to the throne and so many on a green table in Northcoast."

Daskellin's face went still as coal.

"You're talking out of fear," he said, "and so I'll excuse—"

"Both of you, shut up!" Odderd snapped. "Something's happening."

Dawson followed the man's gaze. On the royal platform, an older woman in the colors of the Kingspire bent her knee before King Simeon. A youth was at her side, leather-armored and still dusty from the road. Prince Aster was looking at his father, the parade forgotten. King Simeon's mouth moved, and even at distance, Dawson recognized shock in his expression.

"Who's the boy?" Canl Daskellin said, almost to himself. "Who brought him news?"

Footsteps came from the wooden stairs behind them, and Vincen Coe appeared. The huntsman bowed to the two other men, but his eyes were on Dawson.

"Your lady wife sent me, lord. You're needed at home."

"What's happened?" Dawson said.

"Your son's returned," Coe said. "There's news from Vanai."

He *what*?" Dawson said.

"He burned it," Jorey said, leaning forward on the bench and scratching a dog between its ears. "Poured oil in the streets, closed the gates, and burned it down."

The year that had passed since Dawson had seen his youngest son had changed the boy. Sitting in the sunroom, Jorey looked more than a year older. His cheekbones had the thin look that came with time on campaign, and the smile that had always lurked just behind whatever expression he wore was gone. Exhaustion pulled at the boy's shoulders, and he smelled of horse sweat and unwashed soldier. It struck Dawson like a detail from a dream that Jorey and Coe could have passed for cousins. Dawson rose and the floor tilted oddly beneath him. He walked to the windows and looked out at the gardens. Snow still haunted the shadows, and the first press of green was softening the bark of the trees. At the back, cherry trees bloomed white and pink.

Geder Palliako burned Vanai.

"He didn't even have us loot it," Jorey said. "There wasn't time, really. He sent out a courier the day before. I've killed horses trying to beat him here."

"You nearly did," Dawson heard himself say.

"Does he know that you were the one who put Geder in place?"

It took Dawson almost a breath to understand the question, and by then his mind was on to questions of its own.

"Why did Palliako do it?" Dawson said. "Was he trying to undermine me?"

Jorey was silent for a long moment, looking into the dumb, bright eyes of the dog before him as if they were in some private conversation. When at last he spoke, his words were tentative.

"I don't think so," Jorey said. "Things were going poorly. He made some bad decisions, and they were bearing fruit. He knew that no one took him seriously."

"He put one of the Free Cities to the torch because he was embarrassed?"

"Humiliated," Jorey said. "Because he was humiliated. And because it's different when it isn't before you."

One of the dogs groaned long and soft. A bluebird fluttered onto a branch, peered in at the two men, and flew off again. Dawson put his fingers to the cold pane of the sunroom's glass, the heat of his flesh fogging the glass. His mind darted one way and then another. The stream of show fighters and mercenaries coming to Camnipol, paid by Issandrian with coin borrowed from Asterilhold. The bland, implacable expression of Paerin Clark, banker of Northcoast. Canl Daskellin's anger. And now, the burned city.

Too many things were moving, all in different directions.

"This changes everything," he said.

"He was different afterward," Jorey said as if his father hadn't spoken. "He was always apart from the rest of us, but before it was that he was a buffoon. Everyone laughed at him. They mocked him to his face, and more than half the time he didn't even notice it. But after, no one laughed anymore. Not even him."

The boy's eyes were toward the window, but he was seeing something else. Something distant, but more real the than the room, the glass, the spring trees in the garden. There was pain in that emptiness, and it was one he recognized. Dawson put aside the chaos. His son needed him, and so however much it howled for his attention, the world would wait.

Dawson sat. Jorey looked at him, and then away.

"Tell me," Dawson said.

Jorey smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. He shook his head.

"I've been to war," Dawson said. "I've seen men die. What you're carrying now, I've carried as well, and it will haunt you as long as you hold it. So tell me."

"You didn't do what we've done, Father."

"I've killed men."

"We killed *children,*" Jorey said. "We killed women. Old men who had nothing more to do with the campaign than to live in Vanai. And we killed them. We took away the water and lit them on fire. When they tried to come over the walls, we cut them down."

His voice was trembling now, his eyes horror-wide but tearless.

"We did an evil thing, Father."

"What did you think war is?" Dawson said. "We're men, Jorey. Not boys swinging sticks at each other and pronouncing the evil wizard's defeat. We do what duty and honor demand, and often what we do is terrible. I was hardly older than you are now for the siege of Anninfort. We starved them. It wasn't fire, but it was a slow, painful death for thousands. And the weak die first. Children. Old men. The plague in the city? We put it there. Lord Ergillian sent riders out to find the sick from all around the countryside, and who we found, we named emissary and sent into the city. They were killed, but not

before the illness spread. Every day, women came to the gates with babies in their arms, begging us to take their children from them. Usually we ignored them. Sometimes we took the babes and killed them there, just out of their mother's reach."

Jorey's face had gone pale. Dawson leaned forward, his hand on the boy's knee as he had since the child had been old enough to sit. Dawson felt a moment's sorrow that that thin-limbed boy was gone, and this moment—this conversation so like one he had had with his own father once—was part of that child's passage out of the world. The child had to go and make way for the man. It gave meaning to the loss, and made it bearable. That was the most Dawson could offer.

"Anninfort rebelled against the throne," he said, "and so it had to fall. And in order that it fall, it had to know despair. The ones they brought were on the edge of starvation. They wouldn't have lived. If the children we killed—the children *I* killed—brought the end a week sooner than it would have come otherwise, then I did the right thing. And I suffered then as you are suffering now."

"I didn't know that," Jorey said.

"I didn't tell you. Men don't put their burdens on their children. I didn't tell your mother. It isn't hers to bear. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Vanai was different. There was no need for it."

Dawson opened his mouth to say something—hopefully something wise and comforting—but he felt the thoughts come into place with an almost physical click. Vanai. Issandrian. The armed mercenaries riding to Camnipol under the thin claim of honoring Prince Aster. The occupying force returning from the south, Geder Palliako at its head.

"Ah," Dawson said.

"Father?"

"Where is Palliako? Is he here?"

"No. With the men. A week behind me, perhaps?"

"Too far. We need him back sooner than that."

Dawson was on his feet again. He threw open the door, shouting for Coe. The huntsman might have been waiting for him. The first instructions were simple enough: find the others. Not only Canl Daskellin, but all the half dozen men who'd thrown their lots with him. Time was short, and victory uncertain. Coe didn't question, only saluted and vanished. When he turned back, Jorey looked bewildered.

Dawson raised his hand, stopping the questions before they came.

"I need one last favor of you before you rest, my boy. I'm sorry to ask, but I believe the fate of the throne rests on it."

"Anything."

"Bring me Geder Palliako. And quickly."

"I will."

"And Jorey? Vanai's death may have saved us."

Hardly an hour passed before Dawson's guests arrived. In addition to Odderd and Daskellin, the Earl of Rivermarch and Baron Nurring came. The others weren't at home, and Coe had gone back out searching for them. This, however, was enough. Five men, all commanding the loyalty of high families and strategic lands, sat or stood or, in Canl Daskellin's case, paced restlessly around the back wall. They still wore the brocade and embroidered hats they'd sported at Issandrian's parade. Clara had brought in two servant girls bearing a tray of water flavored with cucumbers and rounds of twice-baked cheeses that still stood untouched by the wall.

In the time between the courier's arrival at Simeon's side and now, a dozen rumors had already spread. Dawson could see the uncertainty on the faces before him, and he could feel it on the breeze. His own sense of urgency was like a live thing crawling on his back. If this were to be done, it had to be done quickly, before the court had time to decide what the news meant. Before Simeon had the time.

Like a priest before his congregation, Dawson lifted his hands.

"The slaughter of—" he began, then stopped. "The *sacrifice* of Vanai has come like a torch in our darkest hour. And the salvation of the Severed Throne is at hand."

The silence was profound.

"You've lost your mind," Daskellin said.

"Let him talk," the Earl of Rivermarch said. Dawson nodded his gratitude.

"Consider this. Geder Palliako is known to have been at odds with Sir Alan Klin, one of Issandrian's closest allies, almost from the beginning. He managed to supplant Klin as protector of Vanai—"

"*He* managed?" Daskellin said.

"—and rather than use his position to gain wealth or play court politics, he made a decision. A brave and principled decision."

"Geder Palliako," Daskellin said, running a hand through his hair, "is a buffoon we lifted up in order to embarrass Issandrian by making the occupation of Vanai a bog. He's an untried youth whose entire military experience has been taking an arrow in the leg and falling off his horse. Now he also appears to be a bloodthirsty tyrant in the mix. By tonight, Issandrian will have a dozen men who'll swear that his appointment was our doing, and it's almost certain that one of those will be Lord Ternigan. We won't be able to deny it."

Dawson could see the unease in the eyes of the other men, the slope of their shoulders, the angles at which they held their heads. If he answered rage with rage, it would end here with the two of them

snapping at each other like pit dogs and the confidence of the cabal broken. Dawson smiled, and Daskellin spat into the ashes of the fire grate.

"Deny it?" Dawson said. "I'll sit at Palliako's side and be proud. Or did all of you see some different parade than I saw today? Has is not occurred to anyone else that several hundred loyal Anteans under Palliako's command are marching to Camnipol as we speak?"

"I don't understand," Odderd said.

"Here is what we say," Dawson said. "When Palliako discovered that Issandrian was bringing an armed force into Camnipol, he chose to bring his troops to the defense of the throne. Rather than abandon Vanai to our enemies, he took action that would show the steel of his intent. He didn't scrape the city of every last bit of silver. He didn't trade it away for concessions on tariffs. He burned it like a warrior of old. Like the dragons. What other man in all of Antea is so fierce and pure of intention? Who else would have done what he did?"

"But the king gave permission to hold these games. And this army coming to save us? Half of the men are Issandrian's, and the others disdain Palliako at best," Daskellin said. "This is a fairy story."

"They don't disdain him. They *fear* him. And if we all say it loud enough and often enough Issandrian will fear him too," Dawson said. "And since our lives may depend on it, I'd suggest we all practice in chorus."

"So this is what desperation looks like," Daskellin said. Dawson ignored him.

"If Issandrian moves against us, it will show that Palliako was justified. If he doesn't, it will be because Palliako cowed him. Either way, Issandrian loses some part of his grip on the king. And we do it without selling ourselves to Northcoast and the Medean bank. This is a windfall, my lords. We'd be idiots to turn it away. But we must go tell our version of it now. Today. When the court goes to bed tonight, it's our story they have to whisper to their pillows. Wait until opinion is set, and it will be a hundred times harder to change."

"And if Issandrian turns his plot against this Palliako boy?" Barron Nurring said.

"Then the blade meant for your belly may be stuck in his instead," Dawson said. "Now. Tell me you wouldn't prefer that."

Geder

Geder's thighs were chapped and weeping. His back ached. The spring breeze that blew down from the heights smelled of snow and ice. Around him, the remnants of the Vanai campaign rode or marched. They sang no songs, and no one spoke to Geder apart from the bare necessary business of moving the few hundred men, carts, and horses the last few days' journey. Even in his tiny rooms in Vanai with only his lamp-eyed squire for company and Alan Klin's worst duties to fill his day, Geder hadn't felt the full power of being isolated within a crowd.

He could feel the attention of the men on him, the condemnation. No one said a word, of course. Not one among them all stood up and told Geder to his face that he was a monster. That what he'd done was worse than crime. There wasn't any need, because of course Geder knew. In all the long days and cold nights since he'd turned back to the north and home, the roar of the flames hadn't left his ears. His dreams had all been of men and women silhouetted against the fire. He'd been ordered to protect Vanai, and instead he'd done this. If King Simeon ordered him cut down on the throne room floor, it would only be justice.

He had tried to distract himself with his books, but even the legends of the Righteous Servant couldn't pull him away from the constant, gnawing question: what would the king's judgment be? On his best days, Geder imagined King Simeon stepping down from the Severed Throne itself to put a royal hand on Geder's weeping eyes and absolving him. On his worst, the king sent him back to Vanai to be staked to the ground among the dead and eaten by the same crows that had gorged themselves on their bodies.

Between those extremes, Geder's mind found room for a nearly infinite variety of bleak imaginings. And as the mountains and valleys grew familiar, the dragon's road shifting between hills that he'd known a hundred times before, Geder found that each new scenario of his death and humiliation left him with a grim hope. Would he be set afire himself? That would be just. Would he be put in a public gaol and pelted with shit and dead animals? It would be what he deserved. Anything—*anything*—would be better than this grinding and silent regret.

The great promontory on which Camnipol sat appeared at the horizon, the dark stone blued by air and distance. The Kingspire itself

was hardly more than a sliver of light. A lone horseman could make the ride in a couple of days. The full company might need as long as five. The king's cunning men could probably see them already. Geder's gaze kept drifting up to the great city, caught by longing and dread. With every mile, the fear grew stronger and the other traffic upon the road thicker.

The farmlands surrounding the capital city were among the best in the world, dark soil irrigated by the river and still rich from battles fought there a thousand years before. Even in the starving season just after the thaw, the land smelled of growth and the promise of food. Goatherds drove their flocks down the dragon's road from the low winter pastures toward the mountains in the west. Farmers led oxen to the fields ripe for tilling and planting. Tax collectors rode with their petty entourages of sword-and-bows, scraping what could be had of the small towns before their rent contracts expired. It was a rare thing to see a lone man on a good horse, and so Geder knew that the grey stallion coming south was meant for him. It was only when the horse drew up and he saw the rider was Jorey Kalliam that his anxiety broke and his breath came easily.

He turned his own mount off the dragon's jade and into the roadside muck, letting the column move forward without him. Jorey pulled his horse so close that the beasts could have slapped each other's faces with their tails, and Geder's knee nearly touched Jorey's saddle. Exhaustion greyed Jorey's face, but his eyes were bright and sharp as a hunting bird.

"What's the news?" Geder asked.

"You need to come ahead," Jorey said. "Quickly."

"The king?" Geder asked and Jorey shook his head.

"My father," he said. "He wants you there as soon as you can."

Geder licked his lips and looked up at the carts passing slowly by them. Some of the carters and swordsmen pretended not to notice the two of them, others stared openly. Ever since they'd left the corpse of Vanai, Camnipol was the goal he'd held before him, an end to his struggles. Now that the time had arrived, he wanted to delay it just a little more.

"I don't think it would be wise," Geder said. "There's no one to leave in command, and if I'm—"

"Give it to Broot," Jorey said. "He's not particularly bright, but he's competent enough to lead a column down a road. Just tell him to make camp outside the eastern gate and wait for word. *Don't* let him order the disband."

"It's… There's morale to think of," Geder said. "I don't want the men to feel I've abandoned them."

Jorey's expression was eloquent. Geder hung his head, the blush

glowing from his cheeks.

"I'll find Broot," he said.

"And bring your best clothes," Jorey said.

While he gave Broot the instructions Jorey had given him, Geder also changed for a bay gelding who had been at rest trot for the morning. When Geder left his first command behind, it was on a young, fast horse with Jorey Kalliam at his side. The city was much too far to make at a gallop, but Geder couldn't help himself. For a few minutes, he let the animal beneath him press itself against the wind, glorying in the illusion of freedom if not the fact.

They stopped for camp at a black-roofed shack where a muddy path met the dragon's road, both of them too exhausted to do more than see to their horses. Geder collapsed into a dreamless sleep and woke in the morning to find Jorey cinching the girth on the gelding. They had taken to the road almost before Geder had cleared the grogginess from his head.

Before them, Camnipol rose.

The approach from the south was the steepest, the green band of dragon's jade tracing its way up the stone of the promontory like a bit of child's ribbon dropped to the ground. Time and weather had eaten away the stone itself, leaving stretches of a hundred feet or more where the road curved out into the empty air with nothing but caution to hold travelers to the path. The biting spring wind didn't come from any of the four points of the compass, but only down from the city or up from the plain below. The caves and shacks that clung to the face of the stone often needed rough wooden bridges to reach the road itself. The constant ache in Geder's legs distracted him, and the bulk of stone and rough brush obscured his view, so that until they were nearly at the last turn he didn't notice the Kingspire growing larger, the walls of the city gaining bulk. Instead, the great, shining arches and grand towers seemed to appear from nothing, a city built of dreams.

The southern gate was narrow, hardly more than a slit in the high grey stone with doors of worked bronze and dragon's jade that slid aside to allow passage. Just outside the doors, a dozen men in enameled plate sat on warhorses with barding that matched their riders.

As Geder and Jorey drew near, the men drew their swords. The blades flashed in the afternoon sun, and Geder's heart thudded in his chest like a fox in a trap. Here was the moment he'd been anticipating and dreading. Jorey nodded him forward with a smile that Geder couldn't quite interpret. It didn't matter. Geder swallowed his fear and rode trembling to his surrender wishing he'd remembered to put on his good leather cloak.

A single figure strode out of the shadows where the road passed through the wall. Though he wasn't mounted, the man commanded the attention of all those assembled. He was Firstblood, and older. His temples were grey, his face sharp and intelligent. The way he held himself gave the impression of being taller than the horsemen. Geder encouraged his gelding forward. Up close, there was no mistaking Jorey's father. Their eyes were the same shape, and the set of their jaws. He looked down at Dawson Kalliam.

"Sir Palliako," the elder Kalliam said.

Geder nodded.

"It is my honor to welcome you to the Undying City," Dawson Kalliam said. And then, sharply, "Honors!"

The horsemen lifted their swords in salute. Geder squinted at them. He'd never seen someone of noble blood called to the king's justice, but this wasn't how he'd expected it to be. From nowhere, voices rose together in a long, celebratory cry. And strangest of all, snowflakes began skirling down from the broad blue sky.

No. Not snowflakes. Flower petals. Geder looked up, and from at the top of the walls, hundreds of people looked back. Geder lifted an uncertain hand, and the crowd above him roared.

"Coe will see to your mount," Dawson said. "We have a litter waiting."

It took a moment to understand, but then Geder slid to the ground, letting Jorey's father lead him into the twilight break between the city walls. He didn't think to ask who Coe might be.

The litter was ornate, bearing the crest and colors of House Kalliam, but with a blaze of cloth on either side in the grey and blue of Palliako. It had two velvet-upholstered chairs facing each other, and eight Tralgu squatted by the poles. Dawson took the seat that faced backward. Geder pushed a lock of greasy hair back from his eyes. His legs were trembling from the ride. The arrow slits and murder holes all through the city wall were crowded with smiling eyes.

"I don't understand," Geder said.

"A few of my friends and I have sponsored your revel. They're traditional for a leader returning from military victory."

Geder turned around slowly. Something heavy seemed to have taken root in his belly, and the high stone rising above him tilted a little, like a young tree in a high wind. His mouth was dry.

"Victory?" he said.

"The sacrifice of Vanai," Dawson said. "Bold and commanding. It was a braver decision than this kingdom has seen in a generation, and there are those of us who would see that fierceness return to Antea."

In Geder's mind, a woman crawled up over the walls of the dead city, flames leaping behind the darkness of her body. In his memory,

she fell. The roar of the flames filled his ears again as if it had followed him, and his vision narrowed. That was a *victory*? Wide Tralgu hands took his shoulder and guided him into his seat. He stared dumbly at Dawson as the litter shifted under them, and they rose.

The southern gate opened into a rough square. Geder had been there before, and knew what the chaos of beggars, merchants, and guards, oxen and carts and feral dogs looked like. This was like walking into the Camnipol dreamed by a boy who had only heard its glories described. Three hundred people at the least stood behind another honor guard, waving banners of House Palliako. A platform stood to the right with men in embroidered cloaks and cloth-of-gold tunics. There was the Baron of Watermarch. Beside him, a young man in the colors of House Skestinin. Not the lord himself, but perhaps his eldest son. Perhaps half a dozen more whom Geder's reeling mind half recognized before the litter moved on. And then, at the end, his head held high and tears streaming down his cheeks, Geder saw his father's face, and he saw the pride in it.

The crowd followed, cheering and tossing handfuls of flowers and paper-wrapped candies. The sound of them overwhelmed any hope of conversation, so he could only stare at Lord Kalliam in amazement.

At a meeting of half a dozen streets, the litter hesitated. Near the Kingspire, the buildings grew three and four stories high and people hung out of every window, watching him pass. A girl high and to his left pitched out a fistful of bright-colored ribbon, the threads dancing in the air as they fell. Geder waved to her, and something veritiginous and sweet washed through him.

Despite what he'd done, he was a hero. *Because* of what he'd done. It was more than relief; it was reprieve, forgiveness, and absolution. He lifted his arms, drinking in the adulation like a starving man. If it was a dream, he'd rather die than wake from it.

It was a difficult decision," Geder said, leaning across the table and talking loud. "To raze a city like that is a terrible thing. I didn't choose that path lightly."

"Absolutely not," the second son of the Baron of Nurring said, hardly slurring his words at all. "But that's the point, isn't it? Where's the valor in doing the easy thing? There isn't any. But to face the dilemma. Take action."

"Definitive action," Geder said.

"Exactly," the boy replied. "Definitive action."

The revel grounds connected to Dawson Kalliam's mansion. It wasn't as grand as the ballrooms and gardens on an actual holding, but it was near. And to have so much room inside the walls of the

Undying City said more than three times the space in the countryside. Candles glowed up and down the high-domed walls, and blown glass lanterns hung from threads too thin to see in the dusk. Wall-wide doors opened to fresh gardens that still smelled of turned earth and early flowers. The feast and dance had run their course. Half a dozen highborn men had taken to the dais to proclaim the virtues of Geder's actions in the Free Cities.

There had been none of the weakness, timidity, and corruption that had poisoned the generals of Antea for too long now, they said. Geder Palliako had shown his mettle not only to the Free Cities, not only to the world. He had shown it to his own countrymen. Through his actions, he had reminded them all what purity could accomplish. Even the king had sent a messenger with a written notice recognizing Geder's return to Camnipol.

The applause had been intoxicating. The respect and admiration of men who hadn't so much as nodded to him in any of his times at court. Then the dance. Geder generally avoided that particular court pastime, but Dawson Kalliam's wife Clara had insisted that that he accompany her around the garden yard at least once, and by the time he'd made the circuit, he felt almost surefooted. He'd made another few rounds with a few younger, unattached women before his thighs and ankles began to protest sharply enough to stop him. Jorey had brought his leather cloak, and as the day cooled toward night and the wine and beer flowed a bit more freely, Geder was glad of it.

"The mark of a real leader," Geder said, and then lost the thread. "The mark of a leader…"

"I hope you'll excuse me," his father said. "Geder, my boy?"

Geder rose to his feet and his drinking companion nodded his respect and turned away, his steps generally steady.

"It's getting late for an old man," Lerer Palliako said, "but I couldn't go without seeing you. You have exceeded anything I could have hoped. I haven't seen people talking about our family in terms like this since… Well, ever, I suppose."

"Let me go with you," Geder said.

"No no no. It's your night. Enjoy it."

"I'd enjoy talking with you," Geder said, and his father's eyes softened.

"Well, then."

Together, Geder and his father found Lady Kalliam and offered their profound thanks. Somehow the conversation turned until they were accepting her kind words, and they left with the feeling that the night had been an intimate affair with old friends they'd rarely seen. She insisted that they take the litter that had carried Geder through the streets earlier. Walking through the darkened streets wasn't safe, and

even if it had been, it wouldn't do. Jorey appeared as they were about to take their last leave and offered Geder his hand. Geder almost wept, taking it.

As the Tralgu slaves hauled them through the night-dark streets, Geder looked at the stars scattered across the sky. Away from the gleeful crowd, the elation of relief cooled a degree. He was surprised to find that some part of the dread was still there, not sharp anymore, not strong, but present. Not even fear, but the as yet unbroken habit of fear.

His father cleared his throat.

"You're on the rise, my boy. You're very much on the rise."

"I don't know about that," Geder said.

"Oh, no. No, I heard those men tonight. You've caught the court at a delicate time. You're in very real danger of becoming a symbol of something." His father's intonation was merry, but there was something in the way he held his shoulders that made Geder think of a man bracing for a blow.

"I'm not a court pigeon," Geder said. "I'll be pleased to come home and work through some of the books that I found down there. You'd like some of them. I've started a translation of an essay about the last dragons that claims to date from only a few hundred years after Morade fell. You'd like it."

"I'm sure I would," Lerer said.

The Tralgu in the lead grunted expressively and the litter spun elegantly around a tight turn, dipping just a degree to counterbalance the shift.

"I saw Sir Klin didn't attend tonight," Lerer said.

"I wouldn't have expected him," Geder said. For a moment, he was on a frozen mill pond again, discovering the fortune that would have saved Klin's protectorate. "I imagine he's feeling a bit chagrined after all. Vanai was his, and he got called back on a leash. It must embarrass him, seeing me greeted with all this."

"It must. Indeed it must. Lord Ternigan didn't come either."

"He may have been called for elsewhere," Geder said.

"That's it. I'm sure that's it."

In the dark streets, a dog yapped and complained. The breeze that felt cool in the crowded ballrooms and gardens was chill now.

"Court events usually don't have everyone appear," Geder said. "I wasn't even expecting this much."

"Of course not. And it was quite a thing, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

They lapsed into silence. Geder's back ached. Between riding and dancing, he expected to feel half crippled in the morning.

"Geder?"

Geder grunted.

“Be careful with these men. They aren’t always what they seem. Even when they take your side, it’s best to spare an eye for them.”

“I will,” Geder said.

“And don’t forget who you are. Whoever they want you to be, don’t forget who you really are.”

“I won’t.”

“Good,” Lerer Palliako said. He was hardly more than a shadow against a shadow, except that the starlight caught his eyes. “That’s my good boy.”

Marcus

Marcus leaned low, arms to his sides. The pommel of the blackwood sword in his hand was slick with sweat. The Firstblood boy shifting on the far side of the pit wore a pair of fighter's trousers and a serious expression. Marcus waited. The boy licked his lips and hefted his sword.

"No hurry," Marcus said.

The air of the gymnasium was hot, close, and damp. The grunts and shouts of the other fighters struggled over the rush of water in the pipes that fed baths. At least a dozen men stood around the edges of the pit. Most were Kurtadam or Firstblood, though a pair of Timzinae held themselves a little apart. And Yardem Hane, panting and sweat-soaked. No Cinnae had come.

Marcus saw the boy's weight shift, committing to the attack. The boy held his sword to the side, eastern-style, so he had some training. Marcus blocked, chalk dust rising from the blackwood blade, and moved to the boy's left. The boy turned, and Marcus brought his sword down overhand. The boy blocked so aggressively that both swords bounced back. Marcus shifted the blade to his left hand and struck again, low this time, watching the boy's stance.

Avoiding both of Marcus's blows emboldened him. The boy took a firmer grip, feinted clumsily to the right, and darted left. Marcus blocked the attack casually, pulling his blade through the thick air to slap hard across the boy's chest. Marcus watched his opponent stumble back. The chalked practice sword left a line from the boy's lowest rib up to his collarbone.

"Who's next?" he called.

"That's the last, sir," Yardem said.

"Thank you, Captain Wester, sir," the boy said. The skin where Marcus had struck was red and rising. He felt a passing chagrin. He hadn't meant to hurt him.

"Thank you, son. You did well," Marcus said, and the boy grinned.

Marcus put his hands on the side of the pit and pulled himself up. He ached from shoulder to foot, and the pain felt good. Yardem tossed him a wad of the threadbare cloth, and Marcus wiped the sweat off his face and neck. This was the third collection of men they'd tried as new additions to the company. As with the others, it had been a mixed lot. Some had come because they were desperate and had no skills apart from a willingness to cause pain. Others because, by doing it, they

could say they'd been in the pit against Marcus Wester. And a few—no more than a handful—because it was the work they knew and they happened to be at loose ends when Marcus had put out his call.

One of the latter was a stout Kurtadam with a gray-gold pelt and a Cabral acent. Marcus met Yardem's gaze and pointed his chin toward the candidate. Yardem nodded once.

"You," Marcus said. "What was your name again, friend?"

"Ahariel," the Kurtadam said. "Ahariel Akkabrian."

"You know how to fight. What put you in Porte Oliva?"

"Took contract with a company out of Narinisle. Mostly garrison work, but the commander started bunking with the footmen. Got to be about gossip and hurt feelings, I had to get out. I was thinking of the Free Cities. Figure they'll be jumpy for years with what happened to Vanai and all. But I heard you were looking."

"It won't be garrison work," Marcus said.

The Kurtadam shrugged.

"I figured you have your pick of work. Wodford and Gradis and all. If it was good enough to hold you, it'd be enough for a sword-and-bow like me."

"You're an optimist," Marcus said. "But we'd be pleased to have you if the terms suffice."

"Wouldn't waste your time if they didn't," Ahariel said.

"Report in the morning, then. We'll put you on the duty roster."

Ahariel saluted, turned, and walked away.

"I like him," Marcus said. "Doesn't talk much."

"Fit right in, sir," Yardem said.

"Feels good, having a real company again."

"Does."

Marcus dropped the scrap of cloth onto the edge of the pit.

"Is it time?" he asked.

"We should go soon," Yardem said.

The early summer streets of Porte Oliva were hot and crowded. Beggars haunted the corners, and the press of bodies in the streets seemed to add as much heat as the wide, golden coastal sun. The air smelled of the ocean, of honey and hot oil and cumin. The clothes also changed. No jackets, no cloaks. Cinnae men and women strode through the street in diaphanous robes that made their thin bodies seem to shift and bend like shadows or spirits. The Kurtadam shaved themselves until there was hardly enough fur to tie beads onto and wore loincloths and halters barely sufficient to protect the most basic modesty. It was the Firstblood, though, that kept Marcus's attention. Men and women split out of their winter cocoons into bright colors, green and yellow and pink. Tunics were cut down the sides to let air and covert glances skid across bare skin. Every day had the feeling of

festival about it.

Marcus didn't like it.

It reminded him too much of a time when he'd been young and unable to distinguish lust from affection, and memories of that time always led to the times that came after. Meeting a blue-eyed girl named Alys, wooing her with brave tales and pale flowers. The nights of longing, and then one moonlit night at the end of springtime, a shared apple, a kiss beside a waterfall, and the end of longing. His perfect woman. In a just world, she'd be with him still.

Meriam would have been old enough now to suffer the same stirrings and confusions of the flesh, and he would have been as powerless to force wisdom upon her as his father had been with him. But no. By now she'd have been old enough to have married young and imprudently. Another season, and Marcus might have been tickling a grandson under the chin. Being reminded of all those unlived moments was what he disliked about the city. But it was also what he disliked about the world. So long as there was work that needed doing, he could put it all aside.

The question of where to put the permanent home of the new bank had been easily solved when Cithrin spoke to the daughter of the gambler whose stall they slept above. She'd been hoping to talk her father into leaving the trade for years, and had very nearly succeeded. The lower floor was wide enough to support a small barracks, and the basement had an iron strongbox set in stone and countersunk deep into the earth. And so now, where the gambler's stall had once been, the Medean bank of Porte Oliva now lived in modest elegance. The day that the old gambler had signed the contracts, Cithrin announced the change by having the walls repainted in the brightest white she could find. Where the caller had stood, chanting his litany of wagers and odds, a wide tin pot filled with black soil had the thin green stalks and broad sloping leaves of half a dozen tulips still only threatening to bloom.

"Straight to her?" Yardem asked, gesturing at the private stair that led to the rooms that were now exclusively Cithrin's. Marcus shook his head.

"When we're ready to go," he said.

Once, the thick wooden door had opened onto a common area with a high counter on one end. The counter was gone now, and the chalk marks on the slate weren't offered odds, but the names of Marcus's new guards and their duty rotations. All four were waiting now where the gambler's clients had been, looking out the narrow, barred windows and making crude jokes about the people passing by on the street. When Marcus entered, the laughter stopped, and the new guards—two Firstblood men, a Kurtadam woman, and a Timzinae boy

Marcus had taken on a hunch—stood to attention. He'd need more. Overhead, the boards creaked where Cithrin was pacing.

"Bag ready?"

"Yes, Captain Wester, sir," the Kurtadam woman said.

Marcus nodded at her, his mind suddenly an embarrassing blank. She had broad shoulders and hips, and arms as thick as her legs. Her pelt was a glossy black, darker even than the Timzinae boy's scales. And her name was… Edir? Edem?

"Enen," Yardem said. "You carry the coin. Barth and Corisen Mout take forward and back. Captain and I will take flanks."

"And me?" the Timzinae boy asked. The nictatating membranes of his eyes opened and closed in a fast nervous tic. He was easy enough. Whatever his name was, everyone called him Roach.

"You'll stay here and wake the others if anything interesting happens," Marcus said. Roach deflated a bit, so Marcus went on. "If anyone's going to make a play for the strongbox, they'll do it when most of us are away. Keep the door barred, and your ears sharp. You're going to be in more danger than we are."

Roach saluted sharply. Enen stifled a smile. The two Firstblood men went to the weapons chest and started arraying the most vicious weapons that the queensmen would let them carry through the streets. Marcus turned and went back out toward the private stairway, Yardem at his side.

"I'm never going to remember all these names," Marcus said.

"You always say that, sir."

"I do?"

"Yes."

"Hm. Good to know."

The rooms that had seemed so small and cramped when it had been just him, Yardem, Cithrin, and the piled wealth of Vanai had become a respectable private residence for the new head of the Medean bank. It was little more than a room in the back with her bed and desk and a meeting room at the front with a small privacy closet to the side, but Cithrin had put together a hundred small touches that transformed it: fine strips of cloth that hung over the windows, a small religious icon nestled in a corner, the short lacquered table presently covered with old shipping records and copied bills of lading. Taken together, they gave the impression of the home of a woman twice her age. It was as much a costume as anything Master Kit and his players sported, and one that Cithrin wore well.

"I need someone from the Port Registry who'll talk to me," Cithrin said instead of hello. "The trade ships from Narinisle should be coming, and I need to know better how that works. It looks like half the trade in the city happens when those ships come in."

“I’ll see what I can find,” Yardem said.

“Where to today?” Marcus asked.

“A brewer’s just outside the wall,” Cithrin said. “I met her at the taproom. Her guild’s letting her replace her vats, but she doesn’t have the coin to afford it.”

“So we’re loaning it to her.”

“Actually, she’s not permitted to accept loans at interest,” Cithrin said, pulling a light beaded shawl across her shoulders and arranging it the way Master Kit had taught her. “Guild rules. But she is permitted to take money from business partners. So we’re buying part of her business.”

“Ah,” Marcus said.

“If she comes short, we’re in a position to take her shop in hand. If I cultivate a relationship with a cooper and a few taphouses, I can arrange the kind of mutual support that makes everyone very happy for a very long time.”

“Long time,” Marcus said, tasting the words.

“And anyway, breweries are always good investments,” Cithrin said. “Magister Imaniel always said so. There’s never going to be an off market for ale.”

Cithrin looked around the room, pursed her lips, and nodded more to herself than to them. Together, they walked back down the stairway, Cithrin stopping to secure the door behind them. In the street, a half dozen children were playing a game that involved kicking an old wineskin and screaming. Cithrin turned toward the entrance, almost bumping against a Kurtadam man. Marcus silently added the construction of an interior door to his list of things that ought to be done. Having to walk outside to go from one set of rooms to the other had been pleasant enough when they were hiding. Now it was just an unnecessary risk.

The Firstblood men, Corisen Mout and Barth, were laughing with each other but sobered as the three of them came in. Enen was ready, a small leather bag strapped across her shoulders, her hands free and ready. She wore a curved dagger and a weighted baton on her hips. When they walked out to the street, the six of them fell into an easy formation. Despite the close, crowded streets, their path was always clear, the citizens of Porte Oliva standing aside to let them pass. Curious gazes followed them, but only a few especially bold beggars attempted the approach, and they tried for Cithrin. No one came near Enen and her burden of coin. They moved north, through the great wall, and to the spillover buildings of the city beyond it. The press of bodies was more than Marcus liked. The smells of sewer and sweat were thicker here, the streets both more crowded and wider than behind the wall in Porte Oliva’s center.

The brewer's, when they reached it, was a two-story shop built around a narrow courtyard with its own well. Wide doors stood open to the yard, the vats and barrels squatting in the yeast-stinking shadows. The brewer, a Cinnae woman so thick about the body and face she could almost have passed for Firstblood, came out to meet them, grinning like they were family.

"Magistra Cithrin! Come in, come in!"

Marcus watched as Cithrin and the brewer kissed one another's cheeks. He nodded to Enen, and she shrugged off the bag of coins and presented it to the girl as if Cithrin were what she appeared to be. None of the new guards thought the bank was anything different than it claimed. There was no reason that they should.

Cithrin took the bag and gestured to Marcus that he and the others should stay in the yard. He nodded once, and Cithrin and the brewer took one another by the hand and walked into the dim recesses of the brewery, talking like old friends. A Cinnae boy no older than Roach came out wearing a thin leather apron and bearing mugs of fresh ale. It was sweeter than Marcus liked, but with an almost bready aftertaste that he could learn to enjoy. Marcus let the three new guards settle themselves on the stone wall of the well before he met Yardem's eyes and glanced across the yard. The Tralgu drank down his ale, belched, and ambled along at Marcus's side.

"Decent ale," Marcus said.

"Is."

"What do you think of this scheme of hers?"

Yardem's ears flicked back, then forward again, considering. Marcus knew that just by asking he'd changed the Tralgu's answer. What Yardem thought about a scheme that Marcus hadn't questioned was a different thing.

"Seems to be working," Yardem said. "Still more jewelry than I'd like in the basement, but we've got enough swords to scare off stray knives. I don't know much about it, but it seems she's likely to earn back the money she's spending or near to it."

"So that when the big men from Carse swoop down here, they'll find it all more or less intact," Marcus said. "She can hand it over to them, wash her hands, and there's no harm done."

"That's the plan," Yardem said carefully.

"Do you see her handing it back to them?"

Yardem stretched his long, thick arms, turning to look at the open brewery as if he were bored and it was in the way. Marcus waited in silence, hoping that the Tralgu would disagree and expecting that he wouldn't.

"She's going to try to keep it," Yardem said.

"She doesn't know she's thinking about it, but yes," Marcus said.

“She’s good at this. Maybe very good. And she’s not the kind of girl who stops when she likes something too much.”

Yardem nodded slowly.

“How’s she going to do it?” he asked.

Marcus sipped his ale, washing his mouth with it, then spat it onto the courtyard stones. A dozen pigeons lifted off from the rooftop, spinning across the wide blue overhead.

“I don’t understand half of what she’s doing now,” he said. “Do you?”

“No.”

“I don’t know what she’ll try. Likely she doesn’t either. But when she sees it, she’s going to reach for it. Whether it’s a good idea or not.”

Geder

The days that followed Geder's return to Camnipol flowed around him like river water around a stone. Gatherings at the houses of the highest families in Antea filled his days, celebrations for his own victory in Vanai and for the coming anniversary of Prince Aster's naming took the nights. Almost the day after his unexpected revel, he began seeing black leather cloaks the image of his own appearing among the brightly dyed fashions of the court. Men who had never bothered to cultivate a connection to House Palliako had begun calling on him. If his father seemed put off by the attention, that was understandable. Changes that came suddenly could feel catastrophic even when they were changes for the better.

The only things that would have made the ripening spring better would have been rooms within the city itself instead of night after night of heading out before the city gates closed and sleeping in his campaign tent and for the nightmares to stop.

"I don't understand why I shouldn't order the disband," Geder said, spreading a spoonful of apple butter over his morning bread. "If I don't do it soon, Lord Ternigan's sure to."

"He doesn't dare," Canl Daskellin, Baron of Watermarch, said. "Not until all the foreign swords and bows are safely out of Camnipol."

"It's a disgrace," Marrisin Oesteroth, Earl of Magrifell, said, nodding. "Armed rabble in the streets of Camnipol. And hardly even a Firstblood among them. I don't know what Curtin Issandrian was thinking, bringing the slave races. Next he'll be honoring Price Aster with pigs and monkeys."

Around them, the lesser gardens of House Daskellin glowed in the late morning sun. The golden blossoms of daffodils nodded in the breeze. To the east, the reconstructed stadium loomed, stories tall and painted white and red. The games for the prince were to start the next day, but the preliminary spectacles had been running for days—bear baiting, show fights, archery competition. And with them, a growing tension that reminded Geder of the still, heavy heat of the clear summer day before a storm night.

"Did you smell those Yemmu cunning men?" Odderd Faskellan, Viscount of Escheric and Warden of the White Tower, asked with a snort. "The stink coming off them made my eyes water from the platform. And the Southlings."

The plain-faced man at Geder's side—Paerin Clark, he was called,

and with no other title given—drank from his cup as if to hide his expression, but the others around them nodded and grunted their agreement and disapproval.

"They fuck their own sisters," Marrisin Oesteroth said and took a drink of cider. "It's not their fault that they do. Dragons made them that way. Keep their bloodlines true, just like hunting dogs."

"Really?" Geder asked. "I read an essay that said that was a myth started by the Idikki Fellowship after the second expulsion. Like Tralgu eating babies, or Dartinae poisoning wells."

"You're assuming Tralgu don't eat babies," Marrisin Oesteroth said with a laugh, and the others joined in. Including Geder.

The conversation turned to other matters of court: the increasing unrest in Sarakal, the foundering movement to create a farmer's council, rumors of a second war of succession in Northcoast. Geder listened more than he spoke, but when he did, the men seemed to listen to him. That alone was as intoxicating as the cider. When the last of the food was carried away by the servants, Geder took his leave. There would be another gathering like this tomorrow, and another the day after that. And an informal ball that night, scheduled opposite a feast for King Simeon hosted by Sir Feldin Maas. Geder knew because Alberith Maas had asked grudging permission to attend the feast. Geder had allowed it. The court might be divided, but he assumed it always was. Given the number and quality of people at the gatherings he'd attended, he felt fairly sure that the half that had lifted him up into their number was both larger and more powerful. He could afford to be magnanimous.

The sun shone in the late morning sky, the warmth soaking into Geder's cloak and leaving his body feeling soft and comfortable. He strolled through the black-cobbled streets, feeling almost as sure of himself as he had during his first days in Vanai. The lowborn man with a long dirty beard saw him coming and scuttled out of his way. A young woman with a beautiful tea-and-milk complexion smiled at him from her slave-drawn carriage. Geder smiled back and watched her turn to watch him as she was borne away. His jaw ached pleasantly from grinning.

The eastern gate of the city was wider than the southern, built beneath a great archway of worked stone that reached almost as high as the Kingspire itself. Horses' hooves and carriage wheels clattered against the voices of small merchants. The air stank of manure, animals soiling the streets as quickly as prisoners of the petty court could scrape it up. Callers walked under rough wooden signs, announcing whatever news they were paid to repeat: a particular butcher had been soaking his meat in water and selling it by weight, an outbreak of the pox had been traced to a brothel in tanner's row, a

boy had been lost and a reward posted for his return. It was the gossip of any great city, and Geder enjoyed the sound of it without paying attention to the meaning of the words. Every syllable had been paid for, and it was safe to assume most were lies. Geder paused at a stand where a crag-faced Tralgu with a missing leg sold treats of candied lavender and honey stones. When Geder tossed him a coin, the scowling Tralgu caught it overhand, snatching it out of the air.

Outside the walls of Camnipol, the northern plains spread out to the horizon, the green of grass and scrub, but treeless. Anything big enough to burn as firewood had been stripped off the land generations before. What hills there were rose in gentle swells like waves on a calm sea. The camp was scattered just to the east in the shadow of the city. At Jorey Kalliam's suggestion, Geder had given orders to keep it in order as a military group rather than letting the casual disorder of being home run its course. Despite sitting at Camnipol's side, the camp had its perimeter, its sentries, its cookfires, and its acting commander. Fallon Broot, Baron of Suderling Heights, rolled toward him as he reentered the camp.

"What news?" Broot asked. "Word yet from Ternigan?"

"Not yet," Geder said.

"All respect to the man, but there won't be a good seat left in the stadium if he waits much longer."

"We could appeal to King Simeon," Geder said.

"Or you could give the order yourself," Broot said, his deep-drooping mustache twitching.

"Wouldn't presume," Geder said.

Broot laughed once, almost a bark.

"Camp's yours, then. I'll retire, get a bit of rest. Maas is putting on a feast tonight, and it's my turn for leave."

"There's also an informal ball," Geder said with as much nonchalance as he could muster.

"No one wants to see me dance," Broot said. As he walked away, Geder wondered which event the tea-and-milk girl would attend.

In his tent, his squire had cleaned away all the remnants of sleep, but left his books and the tools of translation where they were. Geder sat down at his field desk, picked up the cracked leather of the multiform essay he'd been wrestling with, and searched through the delicate, ancient pages until he found where he'd left off.

> It was the discovery of these weapons in the Sinir mountains that allowed the allied forces of Hallskar and Sarakal to limit the interference of Borja, and eventually reclaim the lands ceded under the agreements five generations before. Despite this, there has been no concerted effort, either among the

> elected Hallskari kings or the traditional families of Sarakal, to explore further caches. The commonly held explanation for this unimaginable oversight was a superstitious fear of something within the valley. The unnamed scribe of Atian Abbey suggests that this might have been a pod of hibernating dragons placed by Drakis Stormcrow or the Dragon Morade's righteous servant, but it seems most likely that it was instead that the plague season that followed the end of the Borjan expansion made all such exploration impossible, and the mountains themselves limited any expedition to the summer months, and foot traffic. This alone should justify a longer and more systematic examination of the footwear of ancient Hallskar, which I shall undertake in my next section.

Sinir mountains. *Sinir*. The word seemed very familiar, but he couldn't quite recall where he'd seen it before. It was recently, though. It was something to do with the Righteous Servant, though. He was sure of that.

The legend that had begun as a pet project had grown to be something more interesting. In the dark hours of the morning after his dreams woke him, Geder would sit with his books, marking each reference and considering the finer points of his translations until the voice of the fire faded from his mind and he could sleep again.

His understanding of the weapon was far from clear, except that it had played a part in the final war of the dragons and involved a magic that separated truth and lies definitively. There were two comments about corruption or infection of blood, but what exactly that meant wasn't clear. It might have been a reference to the rites and spells that Morade had worked in order to bring the Righteous Servant into being, or a description of its function, or a story put out by those who opposed Morade and who had outlived their enemy.

The location associated with the weapon's use was unquestionably in the eastern mountains and wastes that bordered Hallskar, Borja, the Keshet, and Pût. Granted, that left a huge swath of land, much of it near impenetrable. But by dating the references and consulting where the national and tribal borders had shifted through the ages, Geder thought he might be able to make a case as to the particular range associated with it. So, for instance, one book placed the Righteous Servant as east of the Keshet, but using an antiquated name. Another called it east of Borja, using a slightly more recent term. By comparing how the border between the two had changed in the intervening centuries, Geder could speculate a range no larger than four days' ride from north to south. And now if there were a range within that called

Indische, he might be able to put a finger on it.

For the first time in his life, he'd begun the outline of a speculative essay of his own on the subject. It seemed unlikely that the section on ancient Hallskari footwear was likely to be useful, but he wouldn't know until he tried it, so with a deep sigh, Geder leaned on his elbows and began reading. The text wasn't particularly well written, but he still found himself being drawn into the subject. The change in toe bridges as a guide to the racial makeup of the royal court was actually fascinating, given that at least six centuries of historical records had been systematically wiped out during the reign of Thiriskii-adan. The suggestion that there had been a period where Hallskar was ruled by the lamp-eyed Dartinae rather than Haavirkin was enough to raise Geder's eyebrows. He found himself so caught up in the text that he didn't notice the shouting until his squire burst into the tent.

"My lord," the old Dartinae said. "In the city. Something's happened."

Geder looked up, and for a moment his mind kept along its track, judging what his squire might have looked like in the regal leather and gold of Hallskar. The din of voices and crashing metal worked its way into his awareness, and fear hit his blood like winter. Geder leapt up from his desk and ran out of the tent. His imagination already had smoke rising from the walls of Camnipol, the fire of Vanai already roaring his name. Daved Broot, son of Fallon, was running across the plain. Blood soaked his tunic scarlet.

"Someone help that man!" Geder screamed, his voice high and tight. "He's hurt! Someone help him!"

But men were already streaming toward the wounded boy. Geder looked around, trying to find the battle. There was no smoke. No fire. But men were screaming, and nearby. Six men had reached Daved Broot, linked hands under him, and were carrying him back into camp, their arms as a gurney. Geder hurried to meet them. When the wounded man saw him, he reached out.

"Lord Palliako!"

"I'm here," Geder said. The bearers paused.

"The gladiators. They're taking the gate."

"What?"

"The gladiators from the stadium. They're at the gate. They're trying to close it."

It's a riot, Geder thought. *It's a riot in the streets of Camnipol.*

And then, a moment later: *No. A coup.*

"Get him to the cunning man," Geder ordered the bearers. "And then get your blades. Call the formation! Formation!"

First in confusion, and then in disbelief and fear, the camp came to order. Geder's squire scurried up with sword and armor in hand.

Geder took the blade, then gave it back and reached for the armor.

"No time for that," Fallon Broot said, appearing at his side. The man's face was a storm cloud. "If they close the gates, we'll be useless. Speed now, safety in hell."

Geder swallowed. His knees were actually shaking. He heard himself calling the attack as if someone else were doing it, and then, sword in hand, he and Broot and a dozen of the veterans of Vanai were running across the grass field toward the eastern gate. Geder's black leather cloak flapped about him like bat's wings. His sword felt heavy and awkward, and when he reached the gates his breath was short and painful. And under the great eastern arch of the city, the gates were beginning to close.

"To me!" Geder shouted, and pushed himself forward. "Vanai to me!"

He and his men burst through the narrowing space between the gates like a handful of dried peas thrown against a window, first the fastest, then one or two more together, and then all of them in a lump. The square Geder had strolled through not two hours before was changed past recognition. Where there had been carts and carriages, bodies lay in the street. From the overturned table of honey stones and candied lavender, a line of Jasuru archers stood, their scales glittering gold. They loosed arrows, and the man to Geder's left fell down screaming.

"Attack!" Geder shrilled. "Stop them! Attack!"

Geder's men charged, heads down and voices raised. The archers fell back, and from the right, a group of Yemmu in banded steel and leather with huge two-handed swords lumbered toward them. With jaw tusks painted the color of blood, they were like something out of a nightmare. One raised his wide head and howled. There were words in the cry. Geder turned toward the retreating archers, then the advancing swordsmen, and back again.

A wide blade a yard long whirred toward him, and he danced back. The Yemmu was almost half again as tall as a Firstblood man, wide as a cart across the shoulders. Geder lifted his own blade in both hands, and the Yemmu grinned. With a groan, the Yemmu pulled his sword through the air, forcing Geder back again. To the left, a huge blade caught a gap in the armor of one of the Vanai men, spraying hot blood across Geder's chest and face. Somewhere behind him, someone shrieked.

Geder's opponent lifted his sword, preparing to bring it down like an axe. Geder raised his own blade, knowing as he did that he couldn't even deflect the coming blow. Someone ran by him, slamming into the Yemmu soldier and making him stumble.

"Now, Geder!" Jorey shouted. "Cut him!"

Geder scuttled forward, swinging with his blade. The cut wasn't deep, but it got through the leather armor. The Yemmu shouted, and Jorey jumped back. Geder swung again. He was trying for the thing's belly where the armor was thin to let it twist, but the blow went low, dropping toward the thing's thigh. The Yemmu put out its huge grey hand and shoved Geder back, but Jorey Kalliam's blade cut down, drawing a gout of blood from its wrist. It howled, dropping its sword and grabbing at the wound to stanch the flow. Geder rushed in, hewing two, three, four, times at the Yemmu fighter's knee like he was trying to cut down a sapling.

The Yemmu stumbled and fell, lifting its arms in surrender. Geder spun around.

The gates had stopped, neither fully open nor closed, and more of the Vanai soldiers were pouring through the gap. The Jasuru archers were nowhere to be seen, and four of the Yemmu had fallen, with half a dozen more locked in battle against a rising tide of Antean swords. Jorey Kalliam was bent over, breathing hard. Blood trickled from his mouth and stained his teeth, but he was smiling.

"Didn't know what they were starting when they crossed us," Jorey said through a foam of his own blood and saliva. Geder grinned.

* * *

Well," Lerer Palliako said, leaning against the parapet of his balcony. "Well, well, well."

"They actually took the southern gate," Geder said. "Closed it and jammed the mechanism. We still can't open it."

Geder shrugged. The twilight was fading and stars coming out. The feasts and balls were all canceled by order of the throne. Blades and blood in the streets of Camnipol had the king's guard patrolling the streets. King Simeon himself had gathered a select group of nobles in the Kingspire, and set a dusk-to-dawn curfew that meant anyone found in the darkened streets would be slaughtered without question or warning. The houses were being closed and barred, and a fire watch set on the walls of the city. The stadium that had been remade to house Prince Aster's celebratory games instead had a dozen gladiators hung from makeshift gallows. Twice that number had been bound and dropped off bridges, their bodies unburied at the bottom of the Division.

The city's shock and fear seemed to change the air itself. Everything seemed fragile, poised at some great catastrophe. Geder knew he should have been frightened too, but he was exhilarated. An armed revolt in the capital city, and he'd put it down. If he'd been celebrated for the burning of Vanai, he could hardly imagine the glory that would rain down on him now. He was half drunk with the idea of it.

“I also hear Lord Ternigan has ordered the disband,” his father said.

“The men were all desperate to defend their houses and families. If Lord Ternigan hadn’t, I likely would have.”

His father shook his head and sighed. From the window, they could see the Kingspire at the city’s edge, towering above Camnipol and therefore the world. Lights glittered in the windows like stars or the cookfires of an army. Lerer Palliako cracked his knuckles.

“Bad times,” he said. “Very bad times.”

“It won’t go on,” Geder said. “This ends it. There aren’t any more of the gladiators, and if there are, they’ll be hunted down. The city’s saved.”

“There’s whoever suborned them,” his father said. “Whoever arranged the attack. And the names I can put on that list are too powerful to die on a rope. I never spent time at court when I was a young man. I never made the connections and alliances. I wonder now if I should have. But it’s too late, I suppose.”

“Father,” Geder said, but Lerer coughed and held up a hand.

“The disband’s been called, son. You can go anywhere you’d like. Do anything. It might be wise if you were out of Camnipol for a time. Until this is all settled out.”

Unease cut through Geder’s euphoria for the first time since the fighting stopped. He looked around the night-soaked buildings and streets. Surely his father was jumping at shadows. There was nothing to be afraid of. They’d won. The coup had been stopped.

This coup. *This* time.

“I suppose there’s no harm in going home now,” Geder said. “I have an essay I’m thinking about that I think you’d find interesting. I’m tracking geographic references by time and comparing them with contemporary maps to—”

“Not Rivenhalm,” Lerer said.

Geder’s words trailed off.

“You should leave Antea,” his father said. “You’re too much a part of politics we don’t fully understand. First Vanai, and now this? For the season at least, you should go where they can’t reach you. Take a few servants. I’ll give you the money. You can find someplace quiet and out of the way. By autumn, perhaps, we’ll know better where things stand.”

“All right,” Geder said. He felt very small.

“And son? Don’t tell anybody where you’re going.”

Dawson

Simeon paced before them all. The king's face was a mixture of hesitance and determination that Dawson had seen on hunting dogs unsure of how to get down a slope, aware that once they began there would be no stopping. Whatever counsel his old friend had taken in the long night, it hadn't been with him. On the other hand, he was certain it hadn't been with Curtin Issandrian either.

The audience chamber they sat in now wasn't the usual. There were no tapestries or soft velvet cushions, the walls were bare brick. There were no rugs or cushions to support the bent knees of Simeon's subjects. The king's guard stood along the walls with swords and armor that could not be mistaken for merely decorative. Prince Aster sat on a silver throne behind his father. It was clear the boy had been crying.

Curtin Issandrian knelt across the aisle from Dawson, his face drawn and pale. Alan Klin was at his side. Canl Daskellin and Feldin Maas had both managed to avoid attention. Odderd Faskellin was dead of an arrow to the throat, and his killer already feeding the gallows flies. Geder Palliako, by all rights the hero of the hour for holding the southern gate, had already left the city. Dawson was alone.

Behind and above the three of them, the viewing galleries were packed. Every man of nobility sat on low, uncomfortable stools behind the length of woven rope that pretended to separate them from the formal audience. The women stood in the upper gallery, including, somewhere amid the press, Clara. The highest gallery was customarily reserved for the most honored lowborn subjects of the king and ambassadors from foreign courts. Today, it stood empty.

The king stopped pacing, and Dawson didn't lift his head.

"This ends today," Simeon said, his voice ringing out to the farthest corners of the chamber. "It ends now."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Dawson said, his voice carefully humble. A moment later, Issandrian and Klin echoed him.

"Antea will not follow the dragon's path while I sit on the Severed Throne," Simeon went on. "These petty intrigues and political games will *not* bring confusion and strife to the empire at the heart of the world. I swear my life to it, and as your lord, I expect and demand the same of each of you."

This time when Dawson said, *Yes, Your Majesty,* Issandrian's cabal spoke with him.

“Noble blood has been spilled on the streets of Camnipol. Foreign swords have been drawn on our streets,” the king went on. “It no longer matters whether the motives behind it were pure. There must be a reckoning.”

In the corner of his vision, Dawson thought he saw Alan Klin grow even more ashen.

“Do you have any statements before I pass judgment?” the king asked. “Lord Kalliam?”

“No, Your Majesty,” Dawson said. “I abide in loyalty to you and to the Severed Throne.”

“Lord Issandrian?”

“Your Majesty,” Curtin Issandrian said. His voice was shaking. “I wish to draw only two things to your attention. First, I beg that you consider that the violence yesterday may not have been the intention or plan of any man present. But if Your Majesty is adamant that punishment must be meted out, I ask that you spare my compatriot. The games for Prince Aster were my project, and mine alone. I would not have innocent men suffer simply because they know me.”

It was a pretty speech, Dawson thought. But ill-advised.

“My Lord Issandrian forgets that this is not the first violence that your disagreements with House Kalliam have spawned. If you would like to offer yourself up to be made an example of, I will consider it, but don’t think that anyone will find safety behind your skirts.”

“Majesty,” Issandrian said.

In the silence that followed, Dawson closed his eyes. His leg ached where his weight ground bone and skin into the stone floor, but he wouldn’t shift. Fidgeting would be beneath the dignity of the occasion.

“Dawson Kalliam, Baron of Osterling Fells,” King Simeon said. “I am doubling the duties owed by your holdings for the next five years. You are to absent yourself from the court and Camnipol for not less than half a year, nor are you permitted to raise soldiers or hire mercenaries without the express permission of the throne.”

Dawson didn’t speak, but deepened his bow. His heart was beating faster now, and he was careful not to show his anxiety.

“Curtin Issandrian, Baron of Corsa,” the king went on. “I reclaim all lands previously held by you south of the river Andriann, and dismiss you from your positions as Warden of Estinport and Protector of the East. I am doubling the duties owed by your holdings for the next five years, and you are to absent yourself from the court and Camnipol for not less than half a year, nor are you permitted to raise soldiers or mercenaries without the express permission of the throne.”

Dawson closed his eyes. He had to force himself not to shake his head. The disappointment sank in his belly like he’d swallowed a stone. The judgment against Klin would necessarily be equal or less.

And indeed, King Simeon sent him into the same exile, increased his obligations, and stripped him of minor titles. Feldin Maas, wherever he was hiding, escaped without even that much.

When he called them to stand, Dawson looked up at his old friend. His king. Simeon's face was flushed, his breath fast, his face still set in a furious scowl. Behind him, Price Aster's chin was lifted as if in defiance. For a moment, Simeon looked into Dawson's eyes. If there was a flicker in the king's apparent outrage, it was the only acknowledgment Dawson would get. The king's guard stood aside, and Simeon strode out, Aster following, and the galleries burst into a thunderous clamor of voices. Dawson looked across the aisle to where Issandrian and Klin huddled in conversation of their own. Klin looked stunned. Issandrian seemed sad, and Dawson wondered whether it was for the same reason he was.

"Lord Kalliam, sir?"

The captain of the king's guard was a tall man, broad across the shoulders, with a pug face and apologetic, watery eyes. Dawson nodded to him.

"I'll have to ask you to be outside the gates by sundown, my lord," the man said.

"Is my household bound?"

"No, my lord. They can stay if they please."

Dawson scratched at his aching knee. The captain stood for a moment in silent respect, then moved to Issandrian's cabal to deliver, Dawson assumed, the same warning. He turned and walked out. The outer hall was black marble and worked silver. The midday sun glared through tall, unshuttered windows. Clara was there already, waiting for him with Vincen Coe behind her like her shadow. Jorey appeared at the hallway's end walking toward them quickly. His boots rang on the stone floor.

"I thought that went quite well," Clara said.

Dawson shook his head once.

"It was a travesty, dear," he said. "It was the end of the empire."

The carriage awaited them on the street, the team of horses snorting and impatient, as if the animals felt the changes in the city itself. A hundred others like it crowded the narrow streets, waiting for the assembled nobility of Antea to trickle out from the Kingspire. All of them made way for House Kalliam. A swift return to his home was the traditional last respect given an exile.

The rough cobbles rattled the carriage wheels. No one tried to speak. Dawson watched out the side window as the Kingspire vanished around a corner. They passed through the great square and into the streets of the city. Pigeons rose in great flocks, circled, and returned to earth. Then the Silver Bridge, and the great drop of the

Division. Smoke rose from the forges and ovens.

A day ago, noble blood had spilled in these streets. Today, it looked the same as it always had, except to the few like himself who knew better.

At his private mansion, the servants brought out the steps as they always did. Dawson waved away the offered hands. The old Tralgu door servant greeted him solemnly. Within, the servants of the household were preparing the house. Tapestries were being taken down, furnishings draped against dust. His houndsman already had the dogs in their traveling cages; the animals whimpered their confusion and distress. Dawson knelt by them, pressing his hand against the bars to let the dogs smell him and lick at his fingers.

"I can stay on," Jorey said.

"Do that," Dawson said. "I won't have time to put everything to rights before I leave."

"Some of the servants have to stay, dear," Clara said. "The gardens won't survive without the gardeners to look after them. And the fountain in the rose court still needs repair."

In the cage, the dog looked up at Dawson. Its huge brown eyes were soft and frightened. He reached through a finger and stroked its muzzle. A jaw strong enough to sever a fox's spine with a bite leaned gently into him.

"Do what's best, Clara," he said. "I trust you."

"Lord Kalliam?"

Vincen Coe gave a huntsman's salute. Dawson brought himself to nod.

"Lord Daskellin's come, my lord," Coe said. "He's in the western sitting room."

Dawson drew himself to his feet. The dog whined as he walked away from it. There was nothing he could do. He had no more comfort to offer. In the sitting room, Canl Daskellin stood at the window, his hands clasped behind his back like a general overseeing the field of battle. His pipe smoke was sweet enough to cloy.

"Canl," Dawson said. "If there's anything you want of me, it had best be something quick. I don't have time for a hand at cards."

"I came to offer my sympathies and congratulations."

"Congratulations? For what?"

"We've won," Daskellin said, turning away from the window and striding into the room. "You played your hand brilliantly. You lured Issandrian into a thrust he couldn't follow through, then cut his conspiracy down. Now he's in disgrace. His inner circle is exiled. Stripped of lands and titles. There's no saying who will take Prince Aster as ward, but it won't be any of them. There won't be a farmer's council in our lifetimes. I'm sorry it came at a price to you, but I swear

that your name will be praised as a hero while you're gone."

"What good's winning battles when the war's lost?" Dawson said. "Did you actually come here to celebrate, Daskellin? Or is this how you gloat?"

"Gloat?"

"Odderd Faskellin was a rabbit and a coward, but he had high blood. He *died* yesterday. In Camnipol, and by foreign hands. That hasn't happened in centuries. And how did Simeon reply? Increased taxes. Petty exile. A few minor lands and titles shuffled about."

Daskellin leaned against the wall, his arms crossed. Grey smoke spilled from his lips and nostrils.

"What would you have had him do?"

"Slaughter them all himself. Bind them, take sword in hand, and take their heads with his own hand," Dawson said.

"It sounds like you're missing Palliako already," Canl said dryly. Dawson ignored him.

"An armed company in the streets? It's treason against the throne, and to answer it with less than death is one step short of open surrender. He made himself a mask of fierceness, and all it did was point out how frightened he is. You should have seen it. Simeon strutting and raging and calling for an ending. It was like watching a shepherd boy trying to shout down wolves."

"Frightened? Of whom?"

"The power backing Issandrian. He's afraid of Asterilhold," Dawson said, and then pointed an accusing finger at Daskellin himself. "And he's afraid of Northcoast."

The imitation of a smile bent Daskellin's lips and he took his pipe from his mouth.

"I am not Northcoast, old friend," he said. "And if consideration of the reactions of the other courts and kingdoms brought King Simeon to a place of greater mercy, that's wisdom on his part."

"That's permission for every landholder in the kingdom to spread his loyalty as widely as he can," Dawson said. "As long as answering to a duchess in Asterilhold or a bank in Northcoast makes us safer than standing by Antea, Simeon won't have a court of his own. He wants to keep the kingdom off the dragon's path so badly that he's walking down it."

Daskellin knelt by the fire grate, knocking the bowl of his pipe against the soot-stained brick. A rain of ashes fell from it.

"We disagree," he said, "but there can be room for a little differences between allies. You're right, of course, that even with Issandrian's cabal hobbled, the danger to the kingdom hasn't entirely passed. Whether you believe me or not, I'd thought to reassure you that I would keep working during your exile."

“By selling us to the Medean bank?”

“By seeing that King Simeon has the support and loyalty he needs.”

“Spoken like a diplomat,” Dawson said.

Daskellin bristled, and then as Dawson watched, gathered his temper in. He tucked his pipe into his belt and stood. The smell of old smoke still hung in the room.

“It’s a dark day for you,” Canl said, “so I’m going to take that for what you said and ignore what you meant by it. Whatever you think, I didn’t come to gloat.”

The two stood for a moment, the silence between them stretching. Canl Daskellin made a rueful half-smile, then walked out, putting a hand on Dawson’s shoulder as he passed. Dawson listened to the footsteps draw away, drowning in the noise of his household being uprooted. He stood a moment longer, looking out the window without seeing the early summer trees beyond it. Without hearing the birds or the servants or the whining of dogs.

He turned away.

Dawson left in a single open carriage. He sat on the forward seat, looking back toward the city, Clara sat at his side. Vincen Coe on the bench beside the teamster. Carts with his belongings would come more slowly, but they would come. The path to Osterling Fells would carry them over the dragon’s roads for half a day, and the dragon’s jade under their wheels was smoother than the streets of Camnipol.

“There isn’t any chance of coming upon them, is there?” Clara asked.

“Who?”

“One of them,” Clara said. “Lord Issandrian or Lord Klin. Or Lord Maas. It would by entirely too awkward, I think. I mean really, what does one say? I can’t see inviting them to share a meal, but it would be rude not to. Do you think we should tell the driver to keep distance if he sees another carriage? If we can pretend not to have realized who they are, we can all keep to form. Unless it’s Maas. Phelia must be in ruins over this.”

Despite everything, Dawson smiled. He took his wife’s hand in his. Her fingers were thicker than when he’d first known her. His own, rougher. Time had changed them both in some ways, and in some ways left them untouched. From the first day of their marriage, before even, he’d known she saw a different world than he did. It was part of what he loved in her.

“I’m sure we won’t,” he said. “Issandrian and Klin won’t be taking this road, and there’s no reason for Maas to leave court. Not now.”

Clara sighed and leaned her head on his shoulder.

“My poor man,” she said.

He craned his neck a bit, kissing the hair just above her ear, then put his arm around her shoulders.

“It won’t be so bad,” he said, trying to sound as if he believed it. “I missed the winter in Osterling Fells. This can make up for it. We’ll summer at home, run back to Camnipol for the closing of court, and then turn back for the winter.”

“Can we?” Clara said. “We could stay through the winter if you’d rather. We don’t have to make two trips.”

“No, love,” he said. “It’s not just to see the autumn pageant. I’ll want to see how things have played in court before winter anyway. It only seems like I’m indulging you. I’m really a selfish boor.”

Clara chuckled. A few miles later, she began snoring gently. Coe, noticing, handed down a wool blanket in silence, and Dawson covered Clara without rousing her. The sun sank behind them, reddening. Shadows spilled across the landscape, and the trilling, shrill birds of evening announced themselves.

Dawson was leaving the field of battle, but the fight would go on without him. Issandrian, Maas, Klin. They weren’t killed, nor had they acted alone. Maas and his allies in court would do everything in their power to see their names raised again to respectability. Daskellin would doubtless take the helm of Dawson’s own group, or at least that part of it that could stomach the bland little banker from Northcoast. Simeon would dance between the blades and tell himself there was a place at the middle where everything could balance, that peace could be kept if he only never made a stand.

A weak king might survive if he had a loyal court, but in casting Dawson out, Simeon had exiled the only man who had truly championed him. Nothing good could come now. The court was being led through an idiot’s dance, made up of men with their own agendas. Shortsighted, self-serving idiots.

It would take a miracle to redeem King Simeon now. The best hope of the kingdom was that Prince Aster be sent as ward of a family that could show him what kingship was better than the king himself. Dawson indulged himself for a moment in the fantasy of taking the prince under his own wing and teaching him what Simeon could not. Clara murmured in her sleep, pulling the blanket more tightly around her.

The sun dipped down to the horizon, the walls and towers of Camnipol obscured by the power of its fire. For a moment, Dawson imagined the light came from a great conflagration. Not the sunset, but Camnipol burning. It had the weight of prophecy.

Shortsighted, self-serving idiots. A burning city.

Dawson wondered, almost idly, where Geder Palliako had gotten to.

Cithrin

Coffee houses had always had a place in the business of business. In the cold ports of Stollbourne and Rukkyupal, merchants and sea captains hunched over the tiled tables and warmed mittened hands with steaming cups as they watched the winter sun set at midday. Beside the wide, moonlit waters of the Miwaji, the nomadic Southling pods sipped cups of something hardly thinner than mud and declaimed poetry between haggling over fortunes in silver and spice. All through the world that the dragons had left behind, trade and coffee went together.

Or at least that was the way Magister Imaniel had told it. Cithrin had never been outside Vanai, and the bank there had been its own small building. Still, when the time came, Cithrin chose a small café with a private back room and rough wooden tables on the street. It was across the square from the Grand Market, so she would be near the rough-and-tumble of the city's trade without having to do her business in one of the shifting stalls. The owner of the café—Maestro Asanpur—was an ancient Cinnae man with one milky eye and a touch at making fresh coffee that bordered on magical. He had been very happy to accept a bit of rent that gave Cithrin rights to the privacy of his back room. If the day was cloudy, she could sit in the common room, sip her coffee, and listen to gossip. If the sun came out, she could take one of the white-painted street tables and watch the traffic through the Grand Market.

Ideally, Maestro Asanpur's café would become known as a center of banking and business in the city. The better it was known, the more people would come to it, and with them more news and gossip and speculation. Cithrin knew that her own presence was a good beginning, but she likely didn't have enough time to let things take their course. Sooner rather than later, the legitimate Medean bank would come to investigate their new branch, and when that happened, she wanted it to be wildly prosperous.

Which, in the short term, meant a little harmless dishonesty.

Cithrin saw the reaction to Cary's arrival before she saw the woman herself. Gazes shifted through the square like wind passing over a field of grass, then away, and then, more covertly, back again. Cithrin drank her coffee and pretended not to notice as the mysterious woman walked across the square toward the great kiosks where the queensmen who administered the Grand Market stood. Cary had

chosen the longest approach possible, and it gave Cithrin time to admire the costume. The cut was Elassean, but the silk wrapping and the beaded veil spoke of Lyoneia. The jewels that adorned her came from Cithrin's own stock, and would have sold for enough to buy the café twice over. Taken together, the design spoke of all the trade of the Inner Sea with an authenticity that came from Master Kit's travels there. It wasn't a look often seen in Birancour, and the combination of exoticism and wealth drew attention better than a song. Hornet and Smit walked behind her in boiled leather with the swagger they'd learned on the caravan, indistinguishable from real fighters.

Cary reached the kiosk and spoke with one of the queensmen. They were much too far to hear, but the queensman's posture was clear enough. He gestured across the square toward Cithrin and the café. Cary bowed her thanks and turned, taking the walk slowly. When she came close enough to speak with, Cithrin rose.

"Enough?" Cary asked.

"Perfect," Cithrin said. "Come this way."

She led the actors through the common room, the wooden floors creaking under their weight. The interior of the café was a series of small rooms set off by low archways. The windows had carved wooden shutters that scented the breeze with cedar. A young Kurtadam girl sat in the back gently playing a bottle harp, the soft notes murmuring through the air. In one of the rooms, an old Firstblood man talking animatedly with a wide-eyed Southling stopped to stare at Cary and her guards. Cithrin caught Maestro Asanpur's eye and held up two fingers. The old man nodded and set to grinding the beans for two small cups. Cithrin meant for anyone paying attention to know that the exotically dressed woman was someone the Medean bank honored. They moved on to the privacy of her hired room.

"So this is all?" Smit said after the door closed behind them, groaning on its leather hinge. "I thought there'd be more to it."

Cithrin sat at the small table. There was enough room for the others, but rather than sit, Hornet went to the thin window, peering out through the blue-and-gold glass to the alley beyond. As Cary started plucking off the borrowed jewelry, Cithrin pulled the iron lockbox out from under her chair, sliding it on a small red carpet to keep from scarring the floor.

"I don't need very much here," Cithrin said. "A record book, a little spare coin. It's not as if I'll be handing out large sums every day."

"Wasn't that the point, though?" Cary said, handing across a bracelet studded with emeralds and garnets. "To get rid of all that stuff?"

"Not by handing it out like candy," Cithrin said. "There are only so

many good investments to make in a city. It takes effort finding which ones are worth having. This is where I talk with people. Negotiate agreements, sign contracts. It's all arranged here, but I don't want to have all the guards standing around intimidating people."

"Why not?" Hornet said. "I would."

"Better to put them at ease, I expect," Cary said, and a soft knock came at the door. Smit opened it to Maestro Asanpur carrying a tray with two small bone-colored cups. Cithrin unlocked the iron box. As Maestro Asanpur presented the coffee to Cary, Cithrin folded the jewelry into soft cloth and put it into the box beside the red leather record book and her purse of small coin. The lock was crude but solid, the key reassuringly heavy on its leather necklace. Cithrin tucked the key away. Cary sipped the coffee and made a small, appreciative sound.

"Another advantage of the site," Cithrin said.

"We can't stay," Hornet said. "Master Kit's bent on having the Tragedy of Four Winds ready to put on before the trade ships from Narinisle come."

"Are you going to try to sponsor one?" Cary asked.

"A ship or a tragedy?" Cithrin asked dryly.

"Either one."

"Neither," she said.

In truth, the trade ships from Narinisle had been very much on Cithrin's mind.

The great wealth in the world lay in the patterns of commerce. The Keshet and Pût might have olive trees and wine enough for every city in the world, but no mines there produced gold and the iron was in rough, roadless terrain and difficult to reach. Lyoneia grew fabulous woods and spices, but struggled to grow enough grain to feed its people. Far Syramys with its silks and dyes, magic and tobacco, promised the rarest goods in the world, but the blue-water trade to reach them was so uncertain that more fortunes were lost than made in going there. Everywhere, there was imbalance, and the surest path to profit was to be between something valuable and someone who valued it.

On land, that meant control of the dragon's roads. No merely human assembly of stone and mortar could match the permanence of dragon's jade. All the great cities grew where they did because of the arrangements of paths made when humanity was a single race and the masters of the world flew on great scaled wings. Dragons themselves had rarely if ever lowered themselves to travel the roads. They were the servants' stairs of the fallen empire, and they determined the flow of money for all land trade.

The trackless sea, however, could be remade.

Each autumn, ships in the south loaded themselves with wheat and oil, wine and pepper and sugar, and, paid with gold adventurous or desperate enough, made the trek to the north. Northcoast, Hallskar, Asterilhold, and even the northern coast of Antea would buy the goods, often for less than the same items that had traveled overland. The trade ships might take on some cargo in those ports—salt cod from Hallskar, iron and steel from Asterilhold and Northcoast—but most would take their money and hurry to the open ports of Narinisle to wait for the blue-water trade from Far Syramys. This was the great gamble.

Accidents of wind and current made the island nation of Narinisle the easiest end port for ships from Far Syramys, and if a trade ship could exchange its cargo and money for a load freshly arrived from those distant lands, an investor might triple her money. If not, she risked seeing her trade ship return from Narinisle with only what could be bought from the local markets, making a much smaller profit, assuming prices went with her. Or the ship could be lost to pirates, or it might sink and everything either lost entirely or ransomed back at exorbitant rates and glacial slowness from the Drowned.

And when the ships returned to their southern ports and the fortunes of those who had sponsored them rose or fell, the sponsorship of this fleet of gold and spice that sailed together without alliance and answered to no single flag reshuffled. A house that had placed its wager on a single ship and did well might make enough to hire half a dozen the next year. Someone whose ship had been lost would scramble to find ways to survive in their new, lessened circumstances. If they had been wise and insured their investment, they might gain back enough to try again by appealing to someone like Cithrin.

The ships would already have left Narinisle. Soon, the seven that had set out the year before from Porte Oliva would return, and not long after that, someone would come to her and ask that the bank insure them to sponsor a ship for the next year's work. Without knowing which captains were best, without knowing which families were best positioned to buy a good outgoing cargo, she would be left with little better than instinct. If she took all those who came to ask, she'd be sure to take too many bad risks. If she took no one, there would be no chance for her bank to prosper and nothing to show the holding company when they came. This was the species of risk that her life was built on now.

Betting on pit dogs seemed more certain.

"A few insurance contracts, maybe," Cithrin said, as much to herself as to Cary and the others. "Part sponsorship in a few years, if things go well."

“Insurance. Sponsorship. What’s the difference?” Smit asked.

Cithrin shook her head. It was like he’d asked the difference between an apple and a fish; she didn’t know where to start.

“Cithrin forgets that we didn’t all grow up in a counting house,” Cary said and drank down the last of her coffee. “But we should go.”

“Let me know when the new play’s ready,” Cithrin said. “I’d like to watch it.”

“See?” Smit said. “I told you we’d have a patron.”

They left through the alley, transformed from mysterious woman of business and her guards back to seafront players. Cithrin watched them go through her thin window, the glass distorting them as they went. A patron. It was true she wouldn’t be able to go and lead the crowd with Cary and Mikel anymore. She probably wouldn’t be able to go out to a taproom with Sandr. Cithrin bel Sarcour, head of the Medean bank of Porte Oliva, drinking with a common actor? It would be terrible for the bank’s reputation and her own.

The loneliness that came with the thought had little to do with Sandr.

When, an hour later, Captain Wester arrived, Cithrin was out on the street, sitting at the same table where Cary had found her. He nodded his greeting and sat across from her. The sunlight brought out the grey in his hair, but it also brightened his eyes. He handed a sheet of parchment across to her. She looked over the words and figures, nodding to herself as she did. The receipt looked fine.

“How did it go?” she asked.

“No problems,” he said. “The tobacco’s at the seller’s stall. He argued over a few of the leaves, but I told him he either took all of it or none.”

“He shouldn’t have done that,” Cithrin said. “He should be negotiating with me.”

“I may have mentioned something like that. He accepted the delivery. The pepper and cardamom goes out tomorrow. Yardem and a couple of the new men will take that.”

“A start,” Cithrin said.

“Any word from Carse?” Marcus asked. The question sounded almost casual.

“I’ve sent a dispatch,” Cithrin said. “I used Magister Imaniel’s old cipher, and a slow courier, but I expect they’ll have it by now.”

“And you said what?”

“That the branch had placed its letters of foundation and was beginning trade as Magister Imaniel and I had planned,” Cithrin said.

“Not telling them the truth of it, then.”

“Letters go astray. Couriers take extra payment to unsew and copy them. I don’t expect anyone to intercept it, but if they do, it will look

exactly like what it's supposed to be."

Marcus nodded slowly, squinting up into the sun.

"Any reason you picked a *slow* courier?"

"I want time to put things in order before they come," she said.

"I see. There's something we should—"

A deeper shadow than the cloud's fell over the table. Lost in her conversation, she hadn't seen the man approach, and so now he seemed to have sprouted out of the pavement. Taller than Captain Wester, but not so tall as Yardem Hane, he wore a wool tunic and leggings, a blue-dyed cloak several layers thick against the spring cold, and a bronze chain of office. For the most part his features were Firstblood, but slight and fair enough that he might have had a grandfather among the Cinnae.

"Forgive me," he said, his voice scrupulously polite. "Am I addressing Cithrin bel Sarcour?"

"You are," Cithrin said.

"Governor Siden sent me," the man said.

Fear punched the breath out of her. They'd discovered the forgery. They were sending the guard. She cleared her throat and smiled.

"Is there a problem?" she asked.

"Not at all," the messenger said, and produced a small letter, the smooth paper neatly folded and the sides sewn and sealed. "But he did suggest I wait in the event that you wished to reply."

Cithrin held the paper, uncertain where to look—it, the man, the captain. After what seemed entirely too long, she shook herself.

"If you'll let Maestro Asanpur know you've come on my business, he'll see you in comfort."

"You are very kind, Magistra."

Cithrin waited until the man disappeared into the café before she pulled the thread. It cut through the paper with a rattle. Trembling a little, she pressed the opened page onto the table. The script was beautifully shaped, the work of a professional scribe. *To Magistra Cithrin bel Sarcour, voice and agent of the Medean bank in Porte Oliva, I, Idderrigo Bellind Siden, Prime Governor of Porte Oliva by special commission of Her Royal Highness* and on and on and on. Her fingertips slid down the page. *I request your private attention as a voice of trade and a citizen of Porte Oliva concerning certain matters central to the health and vigor of the city* and on and on and on. And then, near the bottom of the first page, she stopped.

The solicitation and arrangement of joint civic security as concerns the safe conduct of maritime trade in the coming year…

"Good God," she said.

"What is it?" Captain Wester said. His voice was low and steady. He sounded ready for her to say they had to kill the messenger and flee

the city. Cithrin swallowed to loosen her throat.

"If I am reading this correctly," she said, "the governor is asking us to propose a joint venture with the city to escort the trade ships from Narinisle."

"Ah," Wester said. And then, "You know I don't understand what you just said, yes?"

"He's putting together a fleet. Fighting ships to see the traders safely up and back. And he's looking for someone with the purse to fund it."

"Meaning us?"

"No," she said, her mind running through the implications with an eerie and cool precision. "He'll want several parties to make proposals, but he's inviting us into the fight. He's asking the Medean bank to make a proposal to underwrite a single-city fleet."

The captain grunted as if he understood. Cithrin was already miles ahead of him and running fast. If Porte Oliva could make itself a more attractive port than the Free Cities, more ships would contract from here. Insurance rates would drop, as the trade seemed less risky. That would hurt anyone who had been trading on insurance alone. And Maccia would hate it, and Cabral would take it poorly if the escort went that far. She wondered what the chances were of direct retaliation against the escort ships.

"Is that the kind of thing we'd be likely to do?" Wester asked from some other part of the world.

"If we took the commission and did the thing well, we'd have connections all through the south and a thumb on the Inner Sea. We'd have something to give the holding company more valuable than a cartload of gold," Cithrin said. "They *couldn't* object to what we've done."

"So it is something we might take on, then."

The knot in Cithrin's belly was still there, but something about it changed. She found herself smiling. Grinning.

"Win this," she said, holding up the pages, "and we win *everything.*"

The meeting at the governor's palace pretended to be nothing. A half dozen men and women sat in a garden courtyard. Queensmen poured out scented water and spiced wine. The governor was a small man, thick-bellied and balding. He treated all his guests with grace and kindness, and as such was practically useless as a guide to who among the assemblage were important. She had hoped to follow his cues, paying attention to the people with whom he spent the most time. Instead, she was left to wonder.

There was an older Kurtadam man, his pelt graying across the face, throat, and back, who represented a chartered collaboration of the

shipwrights' guild and two local merchant houses. A Cinnae man with slightly too much rouge on his cheeks turned out to be the owner of a mercenary company large enough to rent itself to kings. Sitting alone under the spreading fronds of a palm tree, a Tralgu woman drank water and ate shrimp, listening to everything said with a concentration that left Cithrin unnerved. All of them had agendas and histories, interests and weaknesses. Magister Imaniel would have been able to glance across the room and draw conclusions. Or at least educated guesses. Cithrin, on the other hand, was still a year too young to claim her inheritance. The wine was excellent. The conversation friendly and convivial. She felt like she was swimming in a warm ocean, waiting for something to come up from the depths, take her by the leg, and draw her down to the cold.

It didn't help untie her knots that everyone seemed to view her with curiosity. The voice and agent of the Medean bank, newly arrived in the city, and throwing off everyone's plans. None of them, Cithrin told herself, had expected her to be a player in this game. She was badly behind in understanding the politics at play in the courtyard with its brightly colored finches and sun-warmed flagstones, but she had mysteries of her own. The longer she remained a cipher to them, the more she could make sense of the game. She handed her empty glass to one of the queensmen and took another. Wine kept the fear at bay.

"Magistra bel Sarcour," the governor said, appearing at her elbow. "You were in Vanai, yes? Before the Antean aggression."

"Just before," Cithrin said.

"Lucky you got out," the Tralgu woman said. Her voice was as low as Yardem Hane's, but it didn't have the same warmth.

"I am," Cithrin said, keeping her tone neutral and polite.

"What do you make of the fate of the city?" the governor asked. Cithrin had anticipated the question, and she had her answer at the ready.

"Antea has a long history of military interference in the Free Cities," Cithrin said. "Magister Imaniel and I were expecting the occupation a season earlier than it came. That the Anteans didn't intend to hold the city was only clear in the last few weeks before they arrived."

"You think they always intended to destroy Vanai?" a man behind the governor said. He had the features of a Firstblood, but golden skin with a roughness to it that reminded Cithrin of a Jasuru. His eyes were a shocking green. His name was Qahuar Em, and he spoke for a group part trading association and part nomadic tribe from the north reaches of Lyoneia. From his appearance, she guessed he was half Jasuru, though Cithrin hadn't known that was possible.

"We had a strong suspicion," she said to him.

"But why would the Severed Throne do such a thing?" the governor

asked.

"Because they're a bloodthirsty bunch of unmodified northern savages," the Tralgu woman said. "Barely better than monkeys."

"The story I'd heard was that the burning was unexpected, even by King Simeon," the Cinnae mercenary said. "The local commander took the action as some sort of political theater piece."

"Doesn't argue against my monkeys-with-swords thesis," the Tralgu woman said, and the governor chuckled.

"I'm not surprised that there's more than one interpretation," Cithrin said. "Still, you'll forgive me if I'm pleased that I followed the information that we had."

"I heard that Komme Medean was moving his interests to the north, and Antea in particular," the graying Kurtadam said. "Damned odd seeing him take an aggressive position in the south."

Cithrin felt a flutter of concern. If the bank were involving itself in the northern countries—Antea, Asterilhold, Northcoast, Hallskar, and Sarakal—she might well have stepped on toes by founding a branch at the far end of the continent. It wasn't something she was ready to address, so the conversation had to be moved away from the issue and quickly. She smiled the way she imagined Magister Imaniel might have.

"Is there really such a thing as purely northern interests?" she asked. "Narinisle is in the north, and it seems to concern all of us."

The air in the courtyard seemed to still. She'd pulled the hidden meaning of all their banter and laid it on the table. She wondered whether she'd just been rude, so she smiled and sipped her wine, acting as if it had been intentional. Qahuar the half-Jasuru smiled at her, nodding as if she'd won a point in a game.

"Narinisle may be in the north," the graying Kurtadam said, "but the problems are all in the south, aren't they? King Sephan and his unofficial pirate fleet."

"I agree," the Cinnae mercenary captain said. "The only way that trade can be made safe is if Cabral agrees that it is. And that can't be done on the water alone."

The Tralgu woman grunted and put down the shrimp that she'd been eating.

"You aren't going to go on about putting a land force together to protect ships again, are you?" she said. "Porte Oliva starts a land war with Cabral, and the queen'll burn us down as an apology to King Sephan faster than the Anteans lit Vanai. We're a city, not a kingdom."

"Done right, you don't have to use it," the Cinnae said, bristling. "And it isn't an invasion force. But the escort that protects trade ships needs to be able to put swords onto land. The pirate problem can't be

solved if they can run into a cove someplace and declare themselves safe."

Cithrin sat on a high stool, cocked her head, and listened as the façade of politeness began to crack. Like an artist putting a mosaic together one chip at time, she began to make out the shape of divisions and arguments in the group around her.

The chartered collaboration between the shipwrights and the merchant houses was pressing for a limited escort restricted in its range to within a few days' sail from Porte Oliva. Protect the neighborhood, their argument went, and the trade ships will come of their own accord. It would cost less, and so the offsetting tariffs could be small. Listening to the Cinnae man and Tralgu woman press, Cithrin was fairly certain the merchant houses in question traded in insurance. The limited escort still left a great territory of water unsafe, the chance of piracy and loss high, and so the return on insurance wouldn't go down.

The Cinnae man, on the other hand, was a militarist, because what he brought to the table was a military force. If the others could be made to agree that only a massive force of arms—and especially the sword-and-bows of a mercenary company—would ensure that piracy end, he would be in the best position to provide it. Naturally, none of the others agreed.

The Tralgu woman's argument centered on a treaty between Birancour and Herez that Cithrin didn't recognize. She would need to find a copy to understand how it applied, but simply knowing what she didn't know felt like a little victory.

As the wrangle went on, her smiles felt less and less forced. Her mind danced through each phrase her enemies used, drew connections, set up speculations that she would research once the evening was done. The governor kindly, gently kept the tone from escalating to blows, but stopped short of making peace. This was what he'd brought them here for. This was how he worked. Cithrin held that information as well.

After her third glass of wine, she felt certain enough to put her own argument out.

"Forgive me," she said, "but it seems that we've all become somewhat fixed on piracy as the only problem. But there are other things that can happen to a trade ship. If I understand correctly, three ships were lost in a storm five years ago."

"No," the Tralgu woman snapped.

"Those sank off Northcoast," the Kurtadam said. "They never got as far as Narinisle."

"And yet the investment in them was just as lost," Cithrin said. "Is the question we're considering how to protect trade? Or is it only how

to make pirates a lesser risk than storms? It seems to me that an escort ship should be able to answer any number of crises."

"You can't have an escort that follows the ships everywhere and answers every problem," the Cinnae man said.

"The initial cost would be high," Cithrin said, as if that were the objection he'd raised. "It would require a commitment from Porte Oliva long enough to ensure a reasonable expectation of return. And likely some understanding with ports in the north."

She said it all as if it were idle speculation; a chat among friends. They all knew what she'd just said.

The Medean bank would protect trade ships from Porte Oliva as far as they wished to go and all the way home again. She had enough money that she could pour gold into the project and not see a return for years. And the bank, with its holding company in Carse, had connections throughout the northern countries. If it was a grander vision than she'd meant to bring to the table, that was fine. The others could compare how many soldiers they had, how cheaply they could do something small, how treaties and trade agreements could be brought to bear. Cithrin could say, *I am the biggest dog in this pit. I can do what you cannot.*

She liked the feel of it.

The courtyard was silent for a moment, then as the Kurtadam drew in an angry breath, the half-Jasuru with the green eyes spoke.

"She's right," he said.

Qahuar Em was sitting at the governor's side. In the light that spilled down from the saturated blue sky, his skin had taken an almost bronze tone, like a statue brought to life. When he smiled, she saw that his teeth, white as a Firstblood's, had the hint of Jasuru points to them.

"You're joking," the Kurtadam said, sounding deflated.

"You could do it by halves," he said, his gaze shifting to the Kurtadam for a moment before shifting back to Cithrin. "But what would stop Daun from doing the same? Or Upurt Marion? Newport or Maccia? You could make Porte Oliva a little bit safer, and be more popular as a place to trade for a few years while other cities followed your example. Or you could move decisively, dominate trade in the region, and capture the trade route for a generation. It just depends what your goals are, I suppose."

Cithrin found herself smiling at him even as it occurred to her that he'd spoken even less than she had. She'd need to watch him, she thought. And as if he'd read her mind, he grinned.

The conversation went on for another hour, but the wind had shifted. The Kurtadam restricted himself to petulant asides, the mercenary reframed the military aspect as part of a wider strategy,

and the Tralgu lapsed back into silence. The undercurrent of anger and suspicion was palpable, and the governor seemed quite pleased with the entire proceeding. When Cithrin left, her beaded shawl wrapped around her shoulders, it was hard to remember to step like a woman twice her age. She wanted to walk from the ankle.

She waited on the steps looking out across the square toward the great marble temple, pretending a piety she didn't feel. The sun sank lower in the west, shining into the temple's face and making the stone glow. The moon, already risen, hung in the cloudless indigo of the sky, a half circle of white and a half of darkness. Between the beauty of city and heaven and the perhaps slightly too much wine she'd drunk, she nearly missed her quarry when he walked by.

"Excuse me," she said.

The half-Jasuru turned, looking back over his shoulder as if he didn't know her.

"You're called Qahuar?" she said.

He corrected her pronunciation gently. Standing on the step below hers, their heads were even.

"I wanted to thank you for supporting me in there," she said.

He grinned. His face was broader than it had seemed in the courtyard. His skin less rough, his eyes softer. It struck her that he was roughly the age she pretended to be.

"I was going to say the same of you," he said. "Between us, I think we'll shake loose the smaller players. I admit, I hadn't been expecting to compete against the Medean bank."

"I hadn't expected to be competing at all," she said. "Still, it's flattering of the governor to think of me."

"He's using you to get better terms from me," Qahuar said. And then, seeing her reaction, "I don't mind. If it goes poorly, he'll be using me to get better terms from you. One doesn't reach his position by being sentimental."

"Still," Cithrin said.

"Still," Qahuar said, as if agreeing.

They stood silently for a moment. His expression shifted, as if seeing her for the first time. As if she confused him. No. Not confused. Intrigued. The angle of his smile changed, and Cithrin felt a warmth in her own expression. She found herself particularly pleased that the man was her rival.

"You've made the game more interesting, Magistra. I hope to see you again soon."

"I think you should," Cithrin said.

Geder

In the rolling flint hills where Sarakal gave way in no clearly marked fashion to the Keshet, the term *prince* had a different meaning than Geder was accustomed to. A man might call himself a prince if he controlled a certain amount of land, or commanded a force of soldiers, or had been son or nephew to a prince. Even race had little impact. The princes of the Keshet might be Yemmu or Tralgu or Jasuru, and there was apparently no formal barrier to other races, though in practice no others were.

Firstblood were especially absent from the wide, arid plains, and Geder found that his small group—himself, his squire, and four men of his father's service—quickly became an object of curiosity in the towns and villages east of Sarakal. The Firstblood prince, they called him, and when Geder tried to correct them, confusion followed. Translating his rank into the terms of the Keshet was a pointless and probably impossible task, and so when the traveling court of Prince Kupe rol Behur extended Geder its hospitality, he found it easiest to pretend he was more or less an equal to the gold-scaled Jasuru lord.

"I don't understand, Prince Geder. You've left your land and your people searching for something, but you don't know what or where it is. You have no claim to it, nor any idea whether claim could be made. What profit do you hope to make?"

"Well, it isn't that kind of project," Geder said, reaching for another of the small, dark sausages from their communal plate.

When Geder had seen the dust plume from the traveling court rising above the horizon like smoke from a great fire, he'd expected it to be like being on campaign. He'd imagined the tents to be something like the kind he'd slept in to and from Vanai, that he slept in now in his quiet exile. He had misunderstood. He hadn't ridden into a camp—not even a grand and luxurious one. It was a township of wood-framed buildings with a temple dedicated to a twinned god Geder hadn't heard of and a square for the prince's feast. Weeds and scrub in the streets showed that it had not been there the day before. Geder assumed it wouldn't be there tomorrow. Like something from a legend, it was a city that existed for a single night, and then vanished with the dew. Torches smoked and fluttered in the breeze. The stars glowed down. The summer heat rose from the ground, radiating up into the sky.

Geder popped the sausage into his mouth. It tasted salty and rich,

with an almost occult aftertaste of sugar and smoke. He'd never eaten anything like it before, and if it had been made of lizard eyes and bird feet, he'd have eaten them anyway. They tasted that good. Of the sixteen communal plates that the slaves carried around the table, this was his favorite. Although the green leaves with red spots and oil was a close second.

"I'm not looking," he said through his full mouth, "for something that will get me gold."

"Honor, then."

Geder smiled ruefully.

"Speculative essay isn't something that gives a man great honor. At least not among my people. No, I'm going because I've heard about a thing that existed a long time ago, and I wanted to see what I could find out about it. Write down what I've learned and what I suspect, so that someday someone can read it and add what they know."

And, he thought, *stay away from the turmoil in Camnipol and find a corner at the farthest edge of the world where the trouble's least likely to reach me.*

"And then?"

Geder shrugged.

"That's all," he said. "What more would there be?"

The Jasuru prince frowned, drank from a mug either cast in the shape of a massive skull or else made from one, and then grinned, pointing a long worked-silver talon at him.

"You're a holy man," the prince said.

"No. God no. Not me."

"A cunning man, then. A philosopher."

Geder was about to protest this too, but then caught himself.

"Maybe a philosopher," he said.

"A man, his mount, and the horizon. I should have seen it. This project is a spiritual matter."

The prince lifted his massive arm, barked something that sounded like an order. The hundred men and women at the long tables—knights or only sword-and-bows, Geder couldn't be sure—raised a shout, laughing and sneering and pushing one another. A few long moments later, a pair of guards appeared at the edge of the square, each with an iron chain in his hand. The chains led back into the darkness, slack in a way that left Geder thinking they were mostly ceremonial.

The woman who came into the light at the end of the chains looked ancient. The broadness of her forehead and the swirling black designs on her skin marked her as a Haavirkin even before she lifted her long, three-fingered hand in salute. Geder had met Haavirkin before when the elected king of Hallskar sent ambassadors to court, but he'd never

seen one as old or with the same sense of utter dignity.

The guards walked before the woman as she approached the prince. Geder couldn't tell from the noise of the crowd whether they were mocking her or celebrating her presence. Her eyes swept over Geder, sizing him up.

"This is my seer," the prince said to him. And then to the woman, "This man is our guest. His travels the Keshet on a spiritual matter."

"He does," the woman agreed.

The prince grinned like she'd given him a present. He put his hand on Geder's arm in an oddly intimate gesture.

"She is yours for tonight," the prince said. Geder frowned. He hoped that this wasn't a question of having a bed servant, though he had heard stories about that kind of thing from old stories about the Keshet. He coughed and tried to think of a way clear, but the seer only lifted her hand. Another servant hurried forward with a wooden stool, and the Haavirkin sat on it, staring at Geder's face.

"Hello," Geder said to her, his voice uncertain.

"I know you," she said, then turned and spat on the ground. "When I was a girl, I had a dream about you."

"Um," Geder said. "Really?"

"She is very good," the prince said. "Very *wise.*"

"My uncle had an illness," the seer said, "only it had no signs. No fever, no weakness, nothing, so there was nothing we knew to cure."

"But then how can you say he was sick?"

"It was a dream," the seer said patiently. "He ate bitter herbs to cure himself, and afterward the water he drank tasted sweet. But there wasn't anything in it but water. The sweet was in him, and it wasn't sweet really. Only that it wasn't bitter. It didn't have the power to cure anything."

The seer took his hand, her long fingers exploring the joints of his fingers as if she were searching for something. She lifted his palm to her nose and sniffed at it. Geder's skin crawled, and he tried to pull away.

"You will see her thrice," she said, "and you will be different people each time. And each time, she will give you what you want. You have already seen her once."

The seer lifted her eyebrows, as if to say, *Do you understand?*

That was supposed to be about me? Geder thought.

"Thank you," Geder said, and she nodded as much to herself as to anyone else. The dancing torchlight made the black marks on her skin seem to shift with a motion of their own.

"That's all?" the Jasuru prince said.

"That is all that I have for him," the seer said mildly. She rose to her feet, the chains leading from her neck jingling. "You and I will speak,

but later."

She made her obeisance, turned, and walked back out through the low scrub and dust, the wooden tables of Keshet warriors and shadows. The chain bearers followed her as if she were leading them. The silence was broken only by the sound of the chain and the mutter of fire from the torches. Geder thought he saw surprise, even shock, on the faces of the knights, but he didn't understand it. Something had just happened, but he couldn't say what.

The prince scratched at the scales along his jaw and neck like a Firstblood stroking a beard. He grinned, sharp dark teeth like a wall.

"Eat! Sing!" he called, and the knights' voices and clamor rose again as they had before. Geder took another sausage and wondered what he'd just missed.

The feast left Geder's stomach unsettled. He lay in his tent listening to the soft summer wind moving through the desert, and failing to will himself to sleep. He heard his squire's soft snores, smelled the fine Keshet dust that seemed to get into everything, and tasted the spiced meats from the feast, the pleasure of them long since gone. Moonlight pressed in at the edges of the tent, turning the darkness silver. He felt restless and torpid at the same time.

The sweet was in him, and it wasn't sweet really. Only that it wasn't bitter. It didn't have the power to cure anything.

Of all the seer's ramblings, those were the words that gnawed at him, as troubling as the spices. It seemed to him now that the Haavirkin woman had been talking about Vanai and Camnipol. If he thought about it, he could still feel the scar healing in his leg where the bolt had struck him. In exactly the same way, the smallest shift of his attention could remind him of the black knot in his chest that had bent him down on the long ride back from Vanai. He couldn't quite recall the shape of his dead mother's face, but the silhouette of the woman against the flames towering above Vanai was as clear to him as the tent around him now. Clearer.

The celebrations and revels that had greeted him in Camnipol should have washed that away, and for a time they had. But not forever. It had been sweet—he'd thought at the time that it was—but maybe it hadn't been. Certainly it had felt glorious when it was going on. He'd risen in the court. He'd saved the city from the mercenary insurrection. And yet here he was, in exile again, fleeing from political games he didn't understand. And as unpleasant as the unease in his belly might be, it was still better than the nightmares of fire.

In truth, what had happened in Vanai wasn't his fault. He had been used. The lost sleep, the constant dread, even the suspicion that

during all his revels and celebrations Alan Klin and his friends had been laughing down their sleeves at him. They were the scars he bore.

He turned the thought over in his mind. The court games that soaked the Kingspire and Camnipol weren't anything he'd ever chosen to put himself into. The relief he'd felt coming back from Vanai to adulation and approval were hollow to him now, and at the same time, he wanted it back. It had let him forget the voice of the flames for a little while. But like the Haavirkin seer's dreamed water, the sweetness hadn't been sweet, just relief from the bitterness. And it hadn't cured anything.

If he only understood what had happened, if he could see through the games and the players, he'd know who was really to blame. And who his own friends really were.

He shifted to his side, pulling his blankets with him. They smelled of dust and sweat. The night was too warm to justify them, but he found the cloth comforting. He sighed and his belly gumbled. The Haavirkin seer had been right in her way. Maybe she was as wise at the prince said. Geder considered finding her in the morning, asking her more questions. Even if it were all superstition and nonsense, it would give him something to think about in the long, isolated nights in the desert.

He didn't notice that he was falling asleep until he woke. Sunlight glowed the fresh yellow of wildflowers, and the brief dew made the world smell cooler than it was. He pulled on his hose and a tunic. It was rougher wear than he'd had last night, but he wasn't going to a princely feast. And after all, this was the Keshet. Standards were likely different. The wooden buildings still stood, and Geder marched out toward them, his gaze shifting, looking for the sentries. He didn't see them.

He didn't see anyone.

When he reached the structures, the great open square where he'd dined less than a day before, they were deserted. When he called out, no one answered. It would have been like a children's song where they'd all been ghosts, except he could follow the footprints and smell the horse droppings and see the not-quite-dead coals still lurking white and red in the firepit. The horses were gone, the men and women, but the wagons remained. The heavy winches that the prince's servants used to construct their sudden towns were still where they had been. He even found the long chains that the seer had worn, wrapped around a bronze spool and dropped in the dust.

He went back to his own camp, where his squire was just putting down a meal of stewed oats and watered cider. Geder sat at his field table, looking at the tin bowl, then up at the abandoned camp.

"They left in the middle of the night," Geder said. "Took what they

could carry without making noise and slipped away in the darkness."

"Perhaps the prince was robbed and murdered by his men," his squire said. "Things like that happen in the Keshet."

"Lucky we weren't caught up in it," Geder said. His oats were honey-sweet. His cider had a bite to it, despite the water. His squire stood quietly by while Geder ate and the other servants struck camp. The sun was hardly two handspans above the horizon when Geder finished. He wanted to be away, back on his own path, and the eerily silent camp left well behind.

He did wonder, though, what else the Haavirkin had seen, and what she had told her prince after the foreign guest had left.

Marcus

I would prefer to give it to Magistra bel Sarcour directly," the man said. "No disrespect, sir, but my contracts don't have your thumb on them."

He was a smallish man, the top of his head coming no higher than Marcus's shoulder, and his clothes smelled like his shop: sandalwood, pepper, cumin, and fennel. His face was narrow as a fox, and his smile looked practiced. The lower rooms of the Medean bank of Porte Oliva had Marcus, Yardem, Ahariel the stout Kurtadam, and the ever-present Roach. The weight of their blades alone was likely as much as the spicer, and yet the man's disdain for them radiated like heat from a fire.

"But since she isn't here," Marcus said, "I'm what you've got to work with."

The spicer's eyebrows rose and his tiny little lips pressed thin. Yardem coughed, and Marcus felt a stab of chagrin. The Tralgu was right.

"However," Marcus went on, "if you'll accept our hospitality for a few minutes, sir, I'll do my best to find her."

"That's better," the man said. "Perhaps a cup of tea while I wait?"

I could kill you with my hands, Marcus thought, and it was enough to evoke the smile that etiquette called for.

"Roach?" Marcus said. "If you could see our guest is comfortable?"

"Yes, Captain," the little Timzinae said, jumping up. "If you'll come this way, sir?"

Marcus stepped out the door and onto the street, Yardem following him as close as a shadow. The evening sun was still high in the western sky. The pot of tulips in front of the bank was in full, brilliant bloom, the flowers sporting bright red petals veined with white.

"You take the Grand Market," Yardem said, "I'll check the taproom."

Marcus shook his head and spat on the paving stones.

"If you'd rather find her, I can go to the Grand Market," Yardem said.

"Stay here," Marcus said. "I'll be right back."

Marcus walked down the street. Sweat pooled between his shoulder blades and down his spine. A yellow-faced dog looked up at him from the shadow of an alleyway, panting and too hot to bark. The streets were emptier now than they would be after sunset, the light driving

people to shelter more effectively than darkness. Even the voices of the beggars and street sellers seemed overcooked and limp.

The taproom was cool by comparison. The candles were unlit to keep from adding even that little extra heat to the darkness, and so despite the brightness of the street, the tables of the common room were dim. Marcus squinted, willing his eyes sharper. There were a dozen people there of several races, but none of them was her. From the back, Cithrin laughed. Marcus threaded his way across the common room, following the familiar tones of her voice to the draped cloth that kept the private tables private.

"… would have the effect of rewarding the most reliable debtors."

"Only until they start becoming unreliable," a man's voice said speaking more softly. "Your system encourages debtors to extend, and if that goes on long enough, you change good risks to bad."

"Magistra," Marcus said. "If you have a moment?"

Cithrin pulled aside the cloth. As Marcus had expected, the half-Jasuru man was with her. Qahuar Em. The competition. A plate of cheese and pickled carrots sat on the table between them alongside a wine bottle well on its way to empty. Cithrin's dress of embroidered linen flattered her figure, and her hair, which had been pulled back, was spilling in casual disarray down her shoulder.

"Captain?"

Marcus nodded toward the alley door. Profound annoyance flashed across Cithrin's face.

"I could step out," Qahuar Em offered.

"No. I'll be right back," Cithrin said. Marcus followed her out. The alley stank of spoiled food and piss. Cithrin folded her arms.

"The spicer's come with the commissions for the week," Marcus said. "He won't give over to anyone but you."

Cithrin's frown drew lines at the corners of her mouth and between her brow. Her fingers tapped gently against her arms.

"He wants to talk about something else," she said.

"And not with your hired swords," Marcus said. "That's my assumption."

The girl nodded, attention shifting inward.

It was moments like this, when she forgot herself, that she changed. The false maturity that Master Kit and the players had trained her into was convincing, but it wasn't Cithrin. And the giddy young woman who shifted between overconfidence and insecurity wasn't her either. With her face smooth, her mind moving in its own silence, she gave a hint of the woman that was in her. The woman she was becoming. Marcus looked away from her, down the alley, and told himself that by doing it he was giving her privacy.

"I should see him," Cithrin said. "He's at the house?"

“Roach and Yardem are with him.”

“I should hurry, then,” she said, humor warming the words.

“I can give Qahuar your regrets—”

“No, tell him I’ll be right back. I don’t want him to leave without me.”

Marcus hesitated, then nodded. Cithrin walked off down the alleyway, careful where she stepped, until she reached the corner, turned into the street, and disappeared. Marcus stood in the reeking shadows for a long moment, then ducked back inside. The half-Jasuru was still sitting at the table, chewing a pickled carrot and looking thoughtful. At a guess, the man was a few years younger than Marcus, though the Jasuru blood made it hard to be sure. The vesitigial scales of his skin and the vibrant green eyes reminded Marcus of a lizard.

“The magistra’s called away for a few minutes. Small business,” Marcus said. “She said she’d be right back.”

“Of course,” Qahuar Em said, then gestured toward the seat where Cithrin had been. “Would you like to wait with me, Captain Wester?”

The wise choice would be to walk away. Marcus nodded his thanks and sat.

“You’re the actual Marcus Wester?” the man asked, motioning to the servant boy for a mug of ale.

“Someone had to be,” Marcus said.

“I’m honored. I hope you don’t mind my saying, I’m surprised to see a man of your fame doing guard work, even for the Medean bank.”

“I’m well enough known among a certain group of people,” Marcus said. “Just walking down the streets, I could be anyone.”

“Still, after Wodford and Gradis, I’d have thought you could command any price you asked as the head of a mercenary company.”

“I don’t work for kings,” Marcus said as the servant boy set the mug onto the table before him. “It narrows my options. Since we’re on good terms, you and I…?”

Qahuar nodded him on.

“I didn’t know you could mix Firstblood and Jasuru,” Marcus said. “You’re the first I’ve seen.”

The man spread his hands. *And yet here I am.*

“We’re more common in Lyoneia. And there’s some work people would rather give a man who has no family.”

“Ah,” Marcus said. “You’re a mule, then? No children.”

“My blessing and my curse.”

“I knew some men like that in the north. You get it with Cinnae and Dartinae mixes too. Knew some men who just claimed it too. Made them more popular with the women. Safe.”

“There are consolations,” Qahuar said, smiling.

Marcus imagined himself reaching across the table and breaking the

man's neck. It would be difficult. Jasuru were strong bastards, and fast besides. He took a long drink of his ale. It tasted of the brewery Cithrin had bought into. Clearly she'd arranged a deal with the taphouse. Qahuar cocked his head, smiling politely with his sharp-tipped teeth.

She's half your age, Marcus thought. *She's still a* child. But he couldn't say that either.

"How are you finding life in Porte Oliva?" Marcus said instead.

"I like it here. I miss being with my clan, but if I can bring them work… Well, it's worth the price."

"Must be an impressive clan to go against the Medean bank. Not many would do that."

"I think of it more as the Medean bank going against us. It'll be a good fight. Magistra Cithrin is an impressive woman."

"I've always thought so," Marcus said.

"Have you worked with her for a long time?"

"We met in Vanai," Marcus said. "Came out here with her."

"She's a good employer?"

"I've got no complaints."

"There was talk about you, you know. A simple branch bank, even one with a holding company like the Medean, with Marcus Wester guarding their house? People have read that as a sign that Magistra Cithrin favors a broader, more military strategy."

"What do you think?" Marcus asked, keeping voice neutral.

"What do I think?" Qahuar said, leaning back against the wall. His brow was furrowed as if he were considering his own thoughts for the first time. He lifted a finger. "I think you have chosen this work because you aren't interested in fielding a private army. And so I think the magistra isn't either."

"Interesting thought."

"You're a valuable man, Captain Wester. Many people know it."

Marcus laughed.

"Are you trying to bribe me?" he asked. "You are, aren't you? You're asking whether I can be bought?"

"Can you?" Qahuar Em asked without the slightest hint of shame in his voice.

"There's not enough gold in the world," Marcus said.

"I understand and respect that. But you understand that my duty to my clan required me to ask."

Marcus finished the last of his ale in a gulp and stood up.

"We have any more business, sir?"

Qahuar shook his head.

"Truly, I am honored to have met you, Captain Wester. I respect you and I respect your employer."

“Good to know,” Marcus said, and then walked back out through the common room to wait for Cithrin on the street, and the heat be damned. When she came, hurrying down the street like a girl her own age, Marcus stepped out. Sweat beaded her skin and smudged the paints that she’d put to her eyes and lips.

“It’s taken care of,” Cithrin said. “It’s good you came for me. That man’s a pretentious ass, but he’s going to be very useful.”

“Your suitor in there tried to bribe me,” Marcus said.

Cithrin paused, and he could see the chagrin in her eyes for less than a heartbeat, and then the mask fell back in place. She became neither the girl nor the woman-still-to-be but the false sophisticate that Master Kit had fashioned. It was the Cithrin that Marcus liked least.

“Of course he did,” she said. “I wouldn’t have expected any less. Captain, I may not be returning to the house tonight. If I’m not there in the morning, don’t be alarmed. I’ll send word.”

She might as well have thrown a brick at his head. *He’s your enemy* and *I forbid you to sleep with that man* and *Please don’t do this* crowded each other out. All he could manage was a nod. Cithrin must have seen something of it in his eyes, because she put her hand on his arm and squeezed gently before she went back inside.

Marcus walked back down the street toward the house, then stopped, turned, and headed for the port instead. The sun, lazing down toward the horizon, pressed on his right cheek like a hand. Near the port, the traffic on the streets thickened. Someone had started putting up streamers of thread, the knots hung from windows and trees, the trailing ends blowing in the breeze like the tentacles of a jellyfish. The street puppeteers were staking out corners and public squares, sitting at them even when they weren’t performing. The ships from Narinisle might not arrive for weeks, but the celebration was already being prepared.

The smell of the port itself was brine and fish guts. Marcus threaded his way past sailors and longshoremen, beggars and queensmen, to the wide square just past the final dock. Two taphouses and a public bath pressed for attention at the edges of the square, bright cloth banners and bored-looking women in too little cloth. At the farthest edge, a crowd stood enthralled around a theater cart. Master Kit wore a flowing robe of scarlet and gold and a wire-worked crown. He held Sandr’s unmoving body in his arms, a thin trickle of red-tinted water dripping down the boy’s flank.

“How? How have I let this be? Oh Errison, Errison my son! My only son!” Master Kit called out, his voice breaking carefully so that all the words were still clear, and then slipped gracefully into verse. “I swear, dear boy, and heed this call! By dragon’s blood and bones of God,

Alysor house shall *fall*!"

Kit froze then, and a moment later, applause rang out. Marcus shifted forward through the crowd as Cary and Smit took the stage, Smit in a mockup of steel armor made from felt and tin and Cary in a tight black dress that had clearly been cut for Opal. Marcus watched through the long final act as the ancient rivalry between noble houses slaughtered first the guilty and then the innocent, mothers killing their daughters, fathers falling to poisons meant for their sons, and the world in general crashing in until at last Master Kit stood alone, all the other players lying at his feet, and wept. By the time the company rose, grinning to take their bows and gather the coins thrown to them, Marcus's mind was almost back in order.

As the company broke down the stage, Marcus walked to the back. Master Kit had changed back to his more customary clothes and was leaning against the seawall and wiping his face with a soft cloth. He smiled when he saw Marcus.

"Captain! Good to see you. What did you think of the show?"

"Convinced me," he said.

"I'm glad to hear it. Hornet! Watch the line there. No, the one you're standing on!"

Hornet danced to the side, and Master Kit shook his head.

"Some days I'm amazed that boy hasn't broken his leg getting up from his bedroll," Kit said.

"Cary's getting better."

"I think she's more comfortable now. By the end of the season I expect she'll have all Opal's old roles in place. I'm still hoping to find a girl to replace Cary, though. I can put Smit in fancy dress and high voice, but I'm afraid it gives the tragic scenes a somewhat lighter tone."

"Any luck?"

"Some," Kit said. "I've talked with a couple of girls who might be good. One's more talented, but she lies. I find that being a good companion on the road is more important than being a good player on the stage. Theater craft is something I think I can teach. How to be a decent person seems to be a harder thing."

Marcus sat, his back to the wall. In the west, the sun had fallen behind the roofs, but the clouds overhead still glowed gold and orange. Kit took a last swipe at his eyes and tucked the cloth into his belt.

"There's a tavern just the other side of the wall," Master Kit said. "We're staying in the back free of charge every night we play one of the comedies. We're on our way back there now, if you'd care to join us."

"I'll think about it."

Master Kit folded his arms. Concern showed in his eyes.

"Captain? All's well with the bank, I hope? Everything I've heard suggests that our girl is doing quite well."

"People keep bringing her money," Marcus said.

"That's what we'd hoped for, isn't it?"

"Is."

"And yet?"

Marcus squinted toward the bathhouse. Two Kurtadam men were shouting at each other, gesticulating toward the house, their words running over each other. A gangly Tralgu girl ambled by, watching them.

"I need a favor," Marcus said.

"What did you have in mind?"

"I'd like you to tell me again how this is her mistake to make. And that I shouldn't be trying to strap padding to every sharp edge she runs at."

"Ah," Master Kit said.

"She's playing at higher stakes than she knows," Marcus said, "and against people who have decades of experience. And…"

"And?"

Marcus ran his hand through his hair.

"She's wrapped herself in it. She doesn't have any idea how much of herself she's putting into this scheme. When it falls out from under her… I want to stop it now. Before she gets hurt."

"I hear you saying that you want to protect her."

"I don't," Marcus said. And then a moment later, "I do. And I have a poor record protecting women. So I want you to tell me that I shouldn't be trying to."

"Why not take this to Yardem? He knows you better than I do, I expect."

"I know what he's going to say. I even know the tone of voice he's going to say it in. No point going through those motions."

"But you think you'd believe me?"

"You're persuasive."

Master Kit chuckled and squatted down beside him. Cary shouted, and the actor hauled the stage up on its hinges, the wooden planks transforming from floorboards to the side of a tall cart. Sandr went to harness the mules. The salt breeze stilled for a moment, then shifted, cool against Marcus's cheek. The clouds greyed, losing the sunlight. It wouldn't be long before the taverns and brothels and bathhouses all hung out their colored lanterns, trying to draw coins and customers the way they drew moths. The queensmen would be out. And Cithrin. Marcus tried not to think what Cithrin would be doing.

Slowly, he laid out everything to the actor. Cithrin's business plans,

her ambitions for the bank and the escort fleet, her courting a relationship with her half-Jasuru rival. Master Kit listened carefully, and when Marcus ran out of words, he pursed his lips and looked up at the darkening sky.

"I'll say this, Captain, because it's true. I believe that Cithrin has all the tools and talents she needs to make this work. If she pays attention, uses her best judgment, and gets only a little bit lucky, she can do this."

"*Can* is a lovely thing. Do you think she *will*?"

Master Kit was silent for four long breaths together. When he spoke, his tone was melancholy.

"Probably not."

Cithrin

Cithrin lay in the darkness. Qahuar lay beside her, the slow deep rhythm of his breath barely audible under the chorus of crickets singing outside the window. The bedding beneath her, around her, was softer than skin and still damp with sweat.

She'd thought that the first time was supposed to hurt, but it hadn't. She wondered how many of the other things she'd heard about sex were wrong. If she'd been raised by a mother, there might have been someone to ask. Still, for someone who hadn't had any clear idea what she was doing, the experiment seemed to have been a success. Qahuar had been drunk enough to abandon his discretion, and she'd followed his lead. A few kisses, a few caresses, and then he'd lifted off her dress, laid her back on his bed, and she'd had to do very little from there. The business of thrusting and grunting had been intimate and absurd, but she found herself thinking of him a bit more fondly afterward. Perhaps the bond that sex made grew from that combination of shared indulgence and indignity.

Still, she was pleased that he was asleep. She was sober now, and between the excitement of the evening and her present sobriety, she had no illusions that rest would come to her. If he'd been awake, trying to maintain a conversation or play the host, it would only have been awkward. Better that he should snore and embrace his pillow and leave her free to think.

If the spring shipping had gone quickly, if the blue-water trade was a bit early, if a hundred things that neither she nor anyone in the city had any way of knowing had happened, the first ships from Narinisle might arrive tomorrow. Or it might be weeks, as much as a month, before the traders knew what their fortunes were. The reports of the captains would carry the last information she needed—the activity of the pirates, the state of the northern ports, the possibility of civil war in Northcoast or of further military action from Antea. The governor would be expecting her proposal shortly after that.

She imagined the auditor arriving. Maybe Komme Medean himself. She would greet him with a smile and lead him up to her rooms. Or perhaps it would be at the café. That would be even better. The milk-eyed Maestro Asanpur would lead him back into the private room, and she would rise from her table to greet him. She'd have the books ready, the accounting made. She imagined him as an old man with fierce eyes and wide hands.

He would look over her statements, her contracts, and his expression would soften. The confusion and rage would wash away, leaving admiration behind. Had she really done so well with the bank's money? Had she really saved it all, and more besides? In the darkness, she practiced raising her eyebrow just so.

"It was nothing," she said, softly but aloud.

She would take the box from beneath her chair with her annual report and her contribution to the holding company. He would look it over, nodding. And then, when everything had been made whole, only then would she bring out the agreement with the governor of Porte Oliva, and hand over the keys to the southern trade. She imagined his hands trembling as he saw the brilliance of all she'd done. A half-breed girl with no parents, and she had managed this. *But only,* she'd say, *only if my branch is accepted.*

"The Porte Oliva bank is *mine,*" she said, and then in the low, rough voice of her imaginary auditor, "Of course, Magistra."

She grinned. It was a pretty thought. And truly, why not? She'd been the one who kept the wealth of Vanai from being captured by the city's prince or the Anteans. She'd been the one to protect it. Once she'd proven that she could manage the bank, why wouldn't the holding company leave her in place? She'd have earned her bank and the life that went with it. The auditor would see that. Komme Medean would see it. She could do this.

Some tiny, invisible insect crawled over her hand and she brushed it away. Her rival and lover muttered something, shifting. She smiled at his sleeping back, the rough texture of his skin. She would be almost sorry to beat him out. But only almost.

As if from a previous life, Yardem Hane's landslide of a voice spoke in her memory. *There's no such thing as a woman's natural weapon.* She saw now that it wasn't true.

When she slipped out of bed, he didn't stir. In the darkness, her clothes were lost somewhere in a tangle on the brickwork floor. She didn't want to risk waking him, so when she found the tunic he'd tossed aside, she pulled it over her head. It reached as far as her thighs. Close enough. She trotted to the corner of the room, her fingers brushing the floor until she found it: a leather thong and brass key that Qahuar Em always wore next to his skin.

Well. Almost always.

The bricks were cool against the soles of her feet, and the sound of her footsteps was as near to silence as made no distinction. The compound was near the port, the rooms small and close, but arrayed around a small courtyard garden. The four servants were full-blooded Jasuru, and of them, only the door slave stayed in his place through the night. Qahuar Em might be the voice of a great Lyoneian clan, but

space was expensive in Porte Oliva, and having a more lavish home than the local nobles was a kind of boasting that would serve him poorly. Cithrin turned a corner in the darkness and counted three doors on her left. The third was oak bound in iron. She found the keyhole and carefully put the stolen key in. When she turned it, the clack of the mechanism sounded as loud as a shout. Her heart raced, but no one raised the alarm. She opened the door and slipped into Qahuar's private office.

The shutters were closed and barred, but once she'd undone them, the light of the quarter moon was enough to make out the general shapes of things. There was a writing desk. A strongbox bolted to the floor. A latticework holder, filled with scrolls and folded letters. A hooded lantern with rings of carved flint and worked steel on a string. Cithrin struck sparks to the wick, then quickly closed and barred the shutters. What had been shadows and silhouettes sprang to life in shades of dim orange and grey. The strongbox was locked, and the key to the office wouldn't fit it. The writing desk was bare apart from a thumb-sized bottle of green ink and a metal stylus. She went to the scrolls and letters, moving quickly, methodically from one to the next, being sure to keep each stack in order and put them back precisely as they were.

She was aware of the anxiety pressing at her gut and the rapid beat of her heart, and she pushed it all aside. She would let herself feel again later, when there was time. A letter from the governor thanking Qahuar for his gift. The chocolate had been exquisite, and the governor's wife especially extended her gratitude. Cithrin put the letter back. An unfurled scroll listed the names and relationships of several dozen people, none of whom meant anything to her. She put it back.

Outside the shuttered window, a salt thrush sang. Cithrin ran her fingers through her hair. Something in this had to be of use. Somewhere in the papers, Qahuar would have said something that told something of what his offer to the governor would be. She reached for another letter, and her arm brushed the lantern. Glass and metal shifted, teetered, and she grabbed it. A second more and it would have fallen. Shattered. Lit the room on fire. Cithrin put it carefully in the middle of the writing desk and went back to her search with trembling hands.

Hours seemed to pass before she found it. A long scroll of fine cotton. The lines of cipher were spaced widely enough that Qahuar had been able to write the message beneath them. Cithrin ran her fingertips along his words. It had been written by an elder of the clan, and it was everything Cithrin had hoped to discover. They could commit fifteen ships to the effort. Each would be manned with a full

crew of two dozen sailors. She kept on reading, her fingers making a soft hushing against the cloth. In compensation, they would ask sixteen hundredths of every transaction in each port for ships accompanied and protected, or nineteen if they asked the clan to guarantee. The elder estimated the initial outlay at two thousand silver, with a profit to the clan of five hundred in a season. The agreement would have to be for a full decade.

Magister Imaniel had often talked about the tools of memory. Ink was best, but writing the figures down and sneaking them out of the house was a risk she didn't have to take. Fifteen ships of two dozen men.

"At the age of fifteen, she'd had two dozen men," Cithrin said to herself.

Sixteen hundredths without guarantee, or nineteen with. So the guarantee was worth three.

"Sixteen for the company, and three more for love."

Two thousand to begin, with an estimated profit of five hundred each year of a ten-year agreement.

"She gave two thousand kisses, took five hundred back, and died alone ten years after that."

There were more details in the scroll—the specifications of the ships, the names of individual captains, the routes the trade would be encouraged to take—and she read as much of it as she could, but at the base, she had what she needed.

She put the scroll back where it had been, then put the lantern in its place and blew the flame out. Used to the light as she'd become, the darkness seemed absolute. The smell of spent wick was acrid and sharp. She closed her eyes and, tracing fingers along the wall, found her way to the door. She slipped into the corridor, turned the lock, and, almost skipping, went back to Qahuar's sleeping chamber. She put the key in the corner where she'd found it, stripped off the tunic, and slipped quickly back into bed.

Qahuar murmured and reached out an arm to drape over her belly.

"You're cold," he said, the words thick.

"I'll be warm soon," she said, and felt his smile as much as she saw it. He nuzzled against her, and she tried to let herself relax into him. She closed her eyes and repeated her rhyme in the privacy of her mind.

At the age of fifteen, she'd had two dozen men, sixteen for company and three more for love. She gave two thousand kisses, took five hundred back, and died alone ten years after that.

Well, you look exhausted," Captain Wester said, leaning against the

wall beside the pot of tulips where the old gambler's caller used to stand. "I was starting to think we'd have to put together a raiding party, take you back by force."

"I told you I wouldn't be back," Cithrin said, walking past him toward her private entrance. He followed her as if she'd invited him.

"You're supposed to be meeting with that woman from the needlemakers' guild at midday. She's likely on her way to that coffee house right now. Unless you're planing to wear that same dress—"

"I can't see her," Cithrin said, walking up the stairs. She heard his footsteps falter, then hurry to catch up. When he spoke, his voice was careful and polite. It sounded like he was talking from half a mile away.

"Do you want to give her a reason?"

"Send someone. Tell her I'm ill."

"All right."

Cithrin sat down on her divan, scowling up at the man. His arms were crossed over his chest, his mouth pinched. He wasn't really much older than Qahuar Em. Cithrin pulled off one of her shoes and massaged her foot. The sole was filthy. Her dress hung from her as if the cloth itself was exhausted and sweating.

"I didn't sleep," she said. "I can't help her anyway."

"If you say so," Wester said, nodding curtly. He turned to leave, and her sudden rush of distress flooded her. She hadn't known how badly she didn't want to be alone.

"Did everything go well while I was gone?" she said, her voice tripping out of her.

Wester stopped at the head of the stairs.

"Went fine," he said.

"Are you angry with me, Captain?"

"No," he said. "I'm going to go tell the needlemakers' woman that you're too ill to see her. I take it we'll send her a note when you're feeling better?"

Cithrin pulled off her other shoe and nodded. Wester went down the stairs. The door clacked closed behind him. Cithrin lay back. The night had been everything she'd hoped, but the first blue light of dawn had left her exhausted. Her body felt limp and shaky the way it had all those nights with the caravan when sleep had escaped her. She'd convinced herself that those days were over, but she'd been wrong. And now, say it or not, Wester was angry, and she was surprised how much his disapproval stung.

She thought of calling him back, of explaining that she'd allowed herself to be seduced for a reason. That going to Qahuar Em's bed had only been a ploy. The more she rehearsed the words, the worse they sounded. Voices rose up from the floor beneath her. The guards that

Wester had hired. From the sound, they were playing at dice. Her spine ached. Someone below her shouted in dismay, and others groaned along in sympathy. She closed her eyes, hoping that being back in her own rooms would relax her enough that she could rest. Instead, her mind jumped and hopped, faster and faster, like a ball rolling down an infinite hill.

Fifteen ships could be split into three equal groups of five or else five of three, so perhaps Qahuar's clan was expecting the merchant ships to divide into three major ports—likely Carse, Lasport, and Asinport. But what if they were expecting the trade to go on past Asterilhold to Antea or Sarakal or Hallskar? Two dozen men in a single ship wasn't a small thing, but would Lyonean sailors do well in the colder waters of the north? Could she argue, with her ties to Carse, that she'd be able to provide ships more experienced in the native waters? And if she made the argument, would it be true?

And why had Opal betrayed her? And why had God let Magister Imaniel die? And Cam? And her parents? And did Sandr still want her? Would Cary still be her friend? Did Master Kit still approve of who and what she was? What did other people do when they had no friends and their lovers were their enemies? There had to be some better way to do things.

The tears welled up in her eyes and trickled down her cheeks. She didn't feel sad. She barely felt anything at all besides tired and annoyed with herself. She was suffering some sort of little fit, and she could wait until it passed. The dice game shifted, and two men's voices caught up a tune, coming together and apart.

Cithrin forced herself to sitting. Then standing. Then she stripped off last night's clothes and put on a simple skirt and blouse. She tied back her hair until she saw the little bite marks that Qahuar had left on her neck and let her hair back down. She filled the little basin by her bedside, washed her face. The paints Cary had left were there, and Cithrin considered remaking Magistra Cithrin of the Medean bank. She decided against it—she had little enough energy as it was—and went downstairs.

When she opened the door, the company went quiet. The two Firstblood men looked at each other and then away. The paler of them was blushing visibly. The Kurtadam man nodded.

"Sorry about that, Magistra," he said. "Didn't think you were here."

Cithrin waved the concern away.

"Yardem?" she said.

"In the back room, Magistra," the Kurtadam said.

Cithrin walked past the guards to the rear, then through into the darkness. Yardem Hane lay on a long, low cot, fingers laced over his belly. His eyes were closed, his ears folded and soft. Cithrin was just

about to turn around, putting the conversation off for another time, when he spoke.

"Help you, ma'am?"

"Um. Yes. Yardem," she said. "You know the captain as well as anybody."

"That's true," the Tralgu said, his eyes still closed and his voice calm.

"I think I may have upset him," she said.

"You wouldn't be the first, ma'am. If it gets to be a problem, the captain will tell you."

"All right."

"Anything else, ma'am?"

The Tralgu didn't move apart from the ride and fall of his chest.

"I slept with a man, and now I'm going to betray him," she said, and her voice sounded as grey and hard as slate. "I have to do it to keep my bank, but I think I feel guilty about it."

Yardem opened one soft black eye.

"I forgive you," the Tralgu said.

Cithrin nodded. She shut the door behind her when she left, then walked back out the street and up her private stair. The voices below her were quiet now, aware that the owner of the house might hear them. She sat at her writing desk, took out the books, and began drafting the proposal that would beat out Qahuar Em.

Geder

Geder couldn't say exactly when they left the dragon's road. At first, it was only that wind and weather had heaped dirt and desert hardpack over the path, even as it passed through a few of the sprawling caravanserais that passed for cities in the Keshet. Then the last of the great meeting places fell away behind him, and the jade of the roadway became rarer, the brown of the earth and yellow-grey of desert grass more common. Then the path was only visible as a stretch where the scrub and weeds were smaller, their roots blocked inches from the surface.

And then it was gone, and Geder was riding through the mountains and valleys at the eastern edge of the world. The trees were thin and twisting, with thick, almost ropey bark that seemed designed to imitate stone. At night, tiny lizards with bright yellow tails skittered across the ground and through the tents. Morning often found one or more dead in the horses' feed sacks. Water became scarce enough that every muddy wisp of a creek meant his five servants would fill everything that would hold moisture, and even so Geder often saw their supply fall to less than half. Every night, he heard the servants talking about bandits and unclean spirits that haunted the empty places in the world. Even though no new dangers appeared, he slept poorly.

Geder had spent most of his life within the limits of Antea. Travel had meant the journey from Rivenhalm to Camnipol, or along the king's winter hunt to Kavinpol, Sevenpol, Estinport. He'd been Kaltfel, royal city of Asterilhold, once as a boy to watch an obscure relation be married. And he had gone on campaign to Vanai under Lord Ternigan, and then Sir Alan Klin. He'd never imagined himself traveling alone or nearly so in lands so barren and cut off that the local villagers had never heard of Antea or the Severed Throne. But when he came to a stand of shacks clumped around a thin, hungry-looking lake, the wary men who came out to meet him shook their heads and shrugged.

He could as well have told them he'd come from the stars or the deep lands under the earth. It would have meant as much, and possibly more. The mountains' inhabitants were Firstblood, but of a uniform olive complexion with dark eyes and thick wiry hair that made them seem like members of a single extended family. Some few knew the civilized languages well enough to trade with the outposts, but for the greater part they spoke in a local patois that Geder could

almost put together from some of the ancient books he'd read. He felt he'd ridden into the dim past.

"Sinir," Geder said. "Are these the Sinir mountains?"

The young man looked over his shoulder at the dozen men who had come from the village and licked his lips.

"Not here," the man said. "East."

On the one hand, everyone he met in the empty, ragged mountains seemed to recognize the word, to know what he meant when he asked. On the other, the Sinir mountains had been just a bit to the east for almost two weeks now, retreating before him like a mirage. The thin, dusty paths snaked through the valleys or along the sides of steep, rocky slopes. They were little more than deer trails, and more than once Geder had found himself wondering if he'd left behind all human habitation, only to find another small, desperate village around the next turning.

"Can you show me?" Geder asked. "Can one of your men take me there? I'll pay you with copper."

Not that copper would have any effect on these people. Coins meant nothing here more than small, particularly bright stones would have done. His black leather cloak would have more use out here, but he didn't want to part with it, and besides, no one he'd met since he left the Keshet for the unmarked lands had shown the slightest interest in his offers. He asked out of habit. Because he had always asked before. He had no real hope that they would accept the bargain.

"Why do you want to go there?" the young man asked.

"I'm looking for something," Geder said. "An old place. Very old. It has to do with the dragons."

The man licked his lips again, hesitated, and nodded.

"I know the place you mean," he said. "Stay here tonight, and I can take you in the morning."

"Really?"

"You want the old temple, yes? Where the holy men live?"

Geder leaned back. It was the first he had heard about a temple or priests, and his heart sped up. There were stories and references in several of the essays on the fall of the Dragon Empire that talked about pods of sleeping dragons lulled into a permanent sleep and hidden in the far corners of the world. This might be a hidden pod of books, scrolls, legends, and tradition. If he could convince the local priest class to let him read the books, or buy copies… He tried to think what he had to offer for trade.

"Prince?"

"What?" Geder said. "Oh, yes. Yes, the old temple. That's where I'd like to go. Do we have to wait for morning? We could go now."

"Morning, sir," the young man said. "You stay with us tonight."

The village boasted two dozen wooden shacks clustered together in a stand of ash. Perhaps a hundred people lived in the dry, quiet squalor. In the high air above them, hawks called and glided, spiraling up toward the sun. Geder had his squire put his tent beside the lakeshore just outside the radius of the village with each of the servants set to keep watch for a part of the night. Not that five servants would be enough to defend him if the locals turned ugly, but if a little warning was the most he could get, he'd take that.

At sunset, an old woman came to his camp with a bowl of mashed roots with bits of cooked meat in it. He thanked her, gave her a few of his remaining copper coins, and then buried the food without eating a bite. The heat of the day poured up out of the ground, and the chill night air came off the water. Geder lay on his cot, his mind perfectly awake and restless. The long, slow dread waiting for sleep had become the hardest part of his day. The poor food, the mind-killing monotony of the trail, the profound loneliness all grated on him, yes, but in the quiet moments between lying down in the darkness and actual forgetfulness, all the things he was running from seemed to catch up with him.

He imagined what might have happened back in Camnipol. The conspiracy behind the attempted coup might have been rooted out, hung in the streets. That would have been the best hope. Or maybe another wave of hired swords had come and slaughtered half the court. He wondered whether Jorey Kalliam's father had given him the same advice that Geder had taken. What part of the world would Jorey have gone to, if he were avoiding the upheaval?

Geder imagined coming home to a kingdom utterly changed. What if Asterilhold had paid the mercenaries as the first strike of a comprehensive invasion? When Geder turned toward home, there might be no Antea, no Severed Throne, no Rivenhalm. His father might be dead even now.

Or Klin and his men might have come into favor again. Geder pictured himself riding through the eastern gate only to find guards at the ready to arrest him and throw him into the public gaol. He stood on a platform, looking out over a sea of seared, burned faces—Vanai, killed at his order—before he realized that he was finally slipping down into dream.

In the morning, the dreams faded and his servants brought him a double handful of dried apples and a tin cup of water. Half a dozen men had congregated at a trailhead. A low cart squatted beside them, loaded with baskets of dried beans and three freshly slaughtered goats. Offerings, apparently, for the temple. The oldest of the men clapped his hands fast and loud, and the others grabbed thick ropes, pulling the cart across the thin dirt. Geder followed on horseback, the

only man in the company riding.

The trail they followed snaked through the hills, clinging to the sides of crevasses and cliffs. The stone itself changed, becoming more jagged and sharp, as if centuries of erosion had failed to soften it. Geder found himself speculating about the relationship of the landscape to the dragon's roads. Could the same endurance also have been given to the broken land here? Was this what marked the Sinir mountains from those around them?

The shapes of some stones was peculiarly organic. There were soft, almost graceful curves, and places where the stones seemed to fit together, articulated like bones. In one meadow they passed through, a collection of curved terraces was marked by borders of a pale, porous rock that matched neither the arid desert stones Geder had become used to nor the new, uneven geography. The effect was as if a giant had died there, leaving its ribs in a jumble on the land. Geder looked up and saw the skull.

The broad forehead alone was as long as his horse. He could have crouched inside the empty eye sockets. The muzzle disappeared into the earth, as if the fallen dragon were drinking from the land itself, and five blade-long teeth still clung to the jaw. Centuries of fierce sunlight had bleached the bone, but wind, sand, and rain hadn't worn it down. Geder pulled his mount to a halt, gaping. The villagers kept hauling their cart, talking to each other, trading a skin of water among them. Geder dismounted and walked to the skull. He hesitated, reached out a hand, and touched the sun-warmed dragon bone. The corpse had lain here for thousands of years. Since before humanity had begun its history.

"Prince?" the young man from the village called. "Come! Come!"

Trembling, Geder lifted himself back into the saddle and trotted along.

The sun hadn't shifted more than a hand's span when the group made a final turn around a high stand of scattered boulders each as large as a sailing ship, and the temple came into view. Carved into the stone of the mountain, the dark holes of doorways and windows stared out into the landscape. Geder had the brief sensation of being stared at by a single, huge insectile eye. A wall as tall as the defenses of Camnipol marked the end of the trail. Huge, towering statues of what had once been human figures were set into the stone along the wall like sentries, their features eroded into knobs and stumps, and a huge spread-winged dragon towered above them all. Great banners shifted in the breeze, one at each of the thirteen statues. Each was a field of a different color—blue, green, yellow, orange, red, brown, black, through thirteen distinct shades—with a pale circle in the center cut by four lines into eight sections.

Its sigil was of cardinal and intercardinal showing the eight directions of the world in which no falsehood could hide. The sign of the Righteous Servant. Tears leapt to Geder's eyes, and something like relief flooded him. Triumph, perhaps. This was the place. He'd found it.

They drew nearer, and the longer it took, the more Geder understood the breathtaking scale of the place. A huge iron gate hung at the front of the wall, imposing and forbidding. Above it, in a brutal script, were the words *Khinir Kicgnam Bat,* each letter as tall as a man. Geder squinted up at them, struggling to make his translation while still half drunk with wonder.

Bound is not broken.

The villagers brought their cart to a stop still fifty yards from the great iron doors. Geder saw now that a section within the door itself was set with a complex of swirling gears. The interlocked teeth clanked once, shifted, and the section of iron parted like a curtain. Six men walked out toward them. They had the same general features as the villagers, though with more roundness to their cheeks and oil sleeking their hair. They wore black robes tied with lengths of chain at the waist and sandals that wrapped their ankles. The men of the village knelt. Geder bowed, but didn't dismount. His horse shifted uneasily beneath him.

The priests looked at one another, then turned to the young man who had led the group.

"Who is this?" the eldest of the priests asked.

"A stranger," the young man said. "He came asking after the Sinir. We brought him to you, the way the Kleron told us."

Geder urged his horse closer. The grandness of the place had made the beast skittish, but he held the reins tightly. The eldest priest stepped toward him.

"Who are you?" the monk asked.

"Geder Palliako, son of the Viscount Palliako of Rivenhalm."

"I don't know this place."

"I'm a subject of King Simeon of Antea," Geder said. And then when the priest stayed silent, "Antea's a very important kingdom. Empire, really. Center of Firstblood culture and power."

"Why have you come here?"

"Well," Geder said, "that's a long story. I was in Vanai. That's one of the Free Cities, or, really it was. It's gone now. But I found some books, and they were talking about this… Ah… They called it the Righteous Servant or the Sinir Kushku, and it was supposed to have been designed by the dragon Morade during the fall of the empire, and I thought that if I could use the different descriptions of where it was compared with the times when the accounts were made I might be able to… find it."

The priest frowned up at him.

"Have you heard of the Righteous Servant?" Geder asked. "By any chance?"

He wondered what he would do if the man said no. He couldn't bring himself to ride back out. Not after seeing this.

"We are the servants of the Servant," the man said. His voice was rich with pride and certainty.

"That's excellent. That's just what I'd hoped! May I…" Geder's words tumbled over themselves, and he had to stop, cough, and collect himself. "I was hoping, if you have archives… Or if I could speak with you. Find out more."

"You will wait here," the priest said.

Geder nodded, but the man had already turned away. The priests were pulling the cart in through the gap in the iron gate, the village men retrieving another much like it. As Geder watched, the priests vanished into their temple, and the other men, waving at him and smiling, went away down the trail, returning to their homes. Geder stayed where he was, caught between the desire to see the temple behind the wall and the fear of being left alone and unable to find his way back through the mountains. The gears in the gate ground themselves closed. The rope-drawn cart vanished around the stones. Geder sat on his horse, trying not to look at the five servants he'd dragged across the known world and into this emptiness. In the distance, a hawk shrieked.

"Should we set up camp, my lord?" his squire asked.

Night fell. Geder sat in his tent, the walls murmuring to themselves in the breeze. At his little desk, by the light of a single candle, he read the books he'd already read ten times over, his eyes taking in the words without the meanings.

The sense of disappointment, of rejection, of rage were slowly building in his belly with the growing certainty that they weren't going to come out. He'd been left to sit on the doorstep like a beggar until he took the hint and limped away. Back to Camnipol, back to Antea, back to all of the things he'd come from.

He was at his journey's end. He couldn't even pretend a reason to push onward. He had crossed two nations, mountains, deserts, only to be snubbed at the end. He turned a page, not knowing what had been on it, and not particularly caring. He imagined himself at home, telling the tale. The Jasuru seer, the dragon bones, the mysterious hidden temple. *And then,* they would say. *What then, Lord Palliako?*

And he would lie. He would tell about the degenerate priests and their pathetic, empty cult. He'd write essays detailing whatever

perversions came to mind, and ascribe all of them to the temple. If it hadn't been for him, for Geder Palliako, the place would have been utterly lost to history. If they saw fit to treat him this way, he could see that they were remembered any way he saw fit.

And the priests would neither know nor care, so where was the pleasure in that? The morning would come, he would have the tent loaded, and he'd begin the trip back. Perhaps he could find a merchant in one of the cities of the Keshet who would accept a letter of credit and buy some decent provisions. Or stop at the village and tell them the priests had instructed them to give him their goats. That would be almost worth doing.

"My lord! My lord Palliako!"

Geder was out of the tent almost before he heard the words. This squire was pointing at the dark iron gate. The small side door was still closed, but a deeper shadow had formed between the two massive panels, a line of darkness.

A man came out, walking toward them. Then two more, with blades strapped to their backs. Geder waved his and his servants hurried to light the torches. The first man was huge, broad across hips and shoulders. His hair was gone, and the expanse of his scalp glowed in the moonlight. In the torchlight, his robe looked black, though in truth it could have been any dark color. The guards behind him wore the same robes as the priests had before, but of finer cloth, and undrawn swords with hilts and scabbards of iridescent green.

"Are you Prince Palliako who has come to learn of Sinir Kushku?" the large man asked. Though he spoke softly, his voice had the weight of thunder behind it. Geder felt his blood shift in his veins at the sound.

"I am."

"What do you offer in return?"

I don't have anything, Geder thought. *A cart, some servants. Most of my silver was spent on the way here, and what do you have to buy with it anyway? It isn't as if any of you were going to the market fair…*

"News?" Geder said. "I can give you reports about the world. Since you're so… remote."

"And do you mean the goddess harm?"

"Not at all," Geder said, surprised by the question. None of the books he'd read had mentioned a goddess.

The big man paused, his attention turning inward for a moment. He nodded.

"Come with me, then, Prince, and let us speak of your world."

Dawson

Summer in Osterling Fells. Dawson rose with the sun and spent his days riding through his lands, tending to the work that his winter business and the intrigues of the spring had left undone. The canals that fed the southern fields needed to be remade. One of the villages in the west had burned late in the spring, and Dawson saw to the rebuilding. Two men had been found trapping deer in his forest, and he attended the hanging. Where he went, his landbound subjects offered him honor, and he accepted it as his due.

Along the roads, the grass grew higher. The trees spread their broad leaves, shimmering green and silver in the breezes and sunlight. Two days from east to west, four from north to south, with mountain tracks to hunt, his own bed to sleep in, and a bowl of perfect blue skies above him. Dawson Kalliam could hardly imagine a more luxurious prison to waste his weeks in while the kingdom crumbled.

The holding itself buzzed with activity. The men and women of the holding were no more accustomed to the presence of the lord during the long days of summer than they were to his absence during the winter months not taken up by the King's Hunt. Dawson felt the weight of their consideration. Everyone knew that he had been exiled for the season, and no doubt the servants' quarters and the stables were alive with stories, speculation, and gossip.

Resenting that made as much sense as being angry at crickets for singing. They were low, small people. They understood nothing that wasn't put on the table before them. Dawson had no reason to treat their opinions of the greater world with more regard than he would a raindrop or a twig on a tree.

Canl Daskellin, on the other hand, he had expected better of.

"Another letter, dear?" Clara asked as he paced the length of the long gallery.

"He's telling me nothing. Listen to this," Dawson said, shaking the pages. He found the passage. "*His majesty remains in poor health. His physicians suspect the weight of the mercenary riot is weighing on him, but expect he will be much improved by the winter.* Or this. *Lord Maas has been most aggressive in his defense of Lord Issandrian's good character, and is making the most of having escaped censure.* It's all like this. Provocations and hints."

Clara put down her needlework. The heat of the afternoon left a beading of sweat across her brow and upper lip, and a lock of her hair

had come free of its dressing. Her dress was thin summer cloth that did little to hide the shape of her body, softer than a young woman's and more at ease with itself. In the golden light spilling through the windows, she looked beautiful.

"What did you expect, love?" she asked. "Direct talk, plainly stated?"

"He might as well not have written," Dawson said.

"You know that isn't true, love," Clara said. "Even if Canl isn't giving you all the details of the court, the fact that he's corresponding means something. You can always judge a person by who they write to. Have you heard from Jorey?"

Dawson sat on the divan across from her. At the far end of the gallery, a servant girl stepped through the doorway, saw the lord and lady in the room, and backed out again.

"I had a letter from him ten days ago," Dawson said. "He says everyone in court is walking quietly and speaking low. Nobody thinks this is over. Simeon was due to name Prince Aster's ward at his naming day, but he's postponed it three times now."

"Why would he do that?" Clara asked.

"The same reason he exiled *me* for Issandrian's treasons," Dawson said. "If he favors us, he's afraid they will take up arms. If he favors them, then we'll do it. And with Canl calling the tunes, I can't say he's wrong to think it."

"I could go and ask Phelia," Clara said. "Her husband's been put in roughly the same position as Canl, hasn't he? And Phelia and I haven't seen each other in ages. It would be good to talk with her again."

"Absolutely not. Send you into Camnipol alone? To Feldin Maas? It wouldn't be safe. I forbid it."

"I wouldn't be alone. Jorey would be there, and I'd take Vincen Coe to keep me safe."

"No."

"Dawson. Love," Clara said, and her voice had taken on a hardness he rarely heard from her. "I let you stop me when there were foreign mercenaries in the streets, but that's passed. And if someone doesn't reach out, the breach will never be healed. Simeon can't do it, poor bear, because it isn't something that can be commanded. You and Feldin can't because you're men and you don't know how. The way this happens is you draw your swords, and we talk about who wore the most fetching dress at the ball until you put them back in their scabbards. Just because you don't feel comfortable with it doesn't mean it's difficult."

"We've gone past that now," Dawson said.

Clara lifted an eyebrow. The silence lasted three heartbeats. Four.

"You need to raise your army, then, don't you?" she said.

“It’s forbidden. Part of my season of exile.”

“Well, then,” Clara said, picking her needlework back up. “I’ll write to Phelia this evening and let her know I’d be open to an invitation.”

“Clara—”

“You’re quite right. I wouldn’t dream of going without escort. Would you like to speak with Vincen Coe, or shall I?”

The anger that leapt up in Dawson surprised him. He rose to his feet, throwing the pages of Canl Daskellin’s letter to the floor. He badly wanted to take some book or bauble or chair and throw it out the gallery window and into the courtyard. Clara’s eyes were on her work, the thin glimmer of the needle piercing the cloth and drawing through, piercing and drawing. Her mouth was set.

“Simeon is my king too,” she said. “Yours isn’t the only noble blood in this house.”

“I’ll talk to him,” Dawson muttered, forcing the words out through a narrowed throat.

“I’m sorry, dear. What did you say?”

“Coe. I’ll talk to Coe. But if he doesn’t go with you, you aren’t going.”

Clara smiled.

“Send my maid to me when you go, dear. I’ll have her fetch my pen.”

The huntsman’s quarters were outside the great granite-and-jade walls of the holding. A long, low building, the roof’s thatching laced down by long ropes of woven leather and weighted by the skulls and bones of fallen prey. The courtyard had weeds growing at the sides where the boots of men didn’t trample them down and baled hay targets for the archers to practice against. The air stank of dog shit from the adjoining kennels, and a huge shade tree arched above the building’s side, snowy with midsummer blooms.

Voices led Dawson to the back of the building. Five of his huntsmen stood or sat around the table of an ancient stump, raw cheese and fresh bread on the wood. They were young men, stripped to their hose in the heat. Dawson felt a moment’s deep nostalgia. Once he’d been much like them. Strong, sure of his body, and able to lose himself in the joys of a warm day. And when he had been, Simeon had been at his side. The years had robbed them both.

One caught sight of him and leapt to his feet in salute. The others quickly followed. Vincen Coe was in the back, his left eye swollen and dark. Dawson strode over to them, ignoring all but the wounded man.

“Coe,” he said. “With me.”

“My lord,” the huntsman said, and hurried to Dawson’s side. Dawson walked fast down the wide track that led from the holding down toward the pond to the north. The shadows of the spiraling

towers striped the land.

"What happened to you?" Dawson said. "You look like you tried to catch a rock with your eyelids."

"Nothing of importance, lord."

"Tell me."

"We drank a bit too much last night, lord. One of the new boys got a bit merry and… made a suggestion I found offensive. He repeated it, and I found myself moved to correct him."

"He called you a catamite?"

"No, my lord."

"What, then?"

In spring, before the start of the court season, the pond was clear as water from a stream. In autumn, after Dawson's return from court, it could be as dark as tea. He'd rarely seen it in the height of summer, the green of the water building on the reflections of the trees to make something almost emerald. Half a dozen ducks made their way across the water, their wakes spreading out behind them. Dawson stood at the edge where the grass had the dampness of mud beneath it. Vincen Coe's uncomfortable silence became more interesting with every passing breath.

"I could ask the others," Dawson said. "They'll tell me if you won't."

Vincen looked out over water to the distant mountains.

"He impugned the honor of Lady Kalliam, my lord. And made some speculations that…"

"Ah," Dawson said. Sour rage haunted the back of his mouth. "Is he still here?"

"No, my lord. His brothers carried him back to his village last night."

"Carried him?"

"I didn't leave him in fit state to walk, sir."

Dawson chuckled. Flies danced across the water before him.

"She's going back to Camnipol," Dawson said. "She has the idea that she can make peace with Maas."

The young huntsman nodded once, but didn't speak.

"Say it," Dawson said.

"With permission, sir. That's not wise. It's hardest drawing blood the first time, and that's already happened. It only gets easier."

"I know it, but she's determined."

"Send me instead."

"I'm sending you in addition," Dawson said. "Jorey's still in the city. He can give you a better picture of where things stand. You protected me when this all started. I need you to protect her now."

The two men stood together. Voices came from behind them. The kennel master shouting to his apprentice. The laughter of the

huntsmen. It all seemed to come from another world. One not so far in the past when things had been better and safer and still right.

"Nothing will hurt her, my lord," Vincen Coe said. "Not while I live."

Three days after Clara left, riding off in the open carriage that had brought them with Vincen Coe riding close behind, the unwelcome guest arrived.

The heat of the day had driven Dawson out of the holding proper and into the winter garden. Out of its season, it looked plain. The flowers that would offer up blooms of gold and vermillion in the falling days of the year looked like tough green weeds now. Three of his dogs lay panting in the heat, dark eyes closed and pink tongues lolling out. The glasshouse stood open. Closed, it would have been hotter than an oven. The garden slept, waiting for its time, and when that time came, it would transform itself.

By then, Clara would have returned. He had spent time away from her, of course. He had court business and the hunt. She had her circle and the management of the household. And yet when she left him behind, the solitude was harder to bear gracefully. He woke in the mornings wondering where she was. He lay down at night wishing she would walk in through the dressing room door, alive with news and insight and simple inane gossip. Between the two moments, he tried not to think of her, or of Feldin Maas, or the possibility of her being used somehow against him.

"Lord Kalliam."

The servant was a young Dartinae girl, new to his service. Her eyes burned in the manner of her race.

"What is it?"

"A man's come asking audience, my lord. Paerin Clark, sir."

"Don't know him," Dawson said, but half a breath later, he did. The pale banker, agent of Northcoast, and seducer of Canl Daskellin. Dawson stood. At his feet, the dogs sat up, looking from him to the servant girl and back while they whined softly. "Is he alone?"

The girl's eyes widened, suddenly anxious.

"He has a retinue, my lord. A driver and footmen. And I think his private man."

"Where is he now?"

"In the lesser hall, my lord."

"Tell him I'll see him in a moment," Dawson said. "Bring him ale and bread, put his men in the servants' hall, and then get me my guard."

The pale man looked up when the doors of the lesser hall swung

open and stood when Dawson entered. That Dawson had four swordsmen in hunting leathers behind him didn't so much as raise the man's eyebrows. The bread on the plate before him had a single bite taken from it, the pewter ale tankard might not have been touched.

"Baron Osterling," the banker said with a bow. "Thank you for seeing me. I apologize for arriving unannounced."

"Are you running Canl Daskellin's errands now, or he running yours?"

"I'm running his. The situation in the court is delicate. He wanted you informed, but he doesn't trust couriers and some things he wouldn't want written in his hand regardless."

"And so he sends the puppet master of Northcoast?"

The banker paused. The faintest touch of color came to his skin, and the polite smile he always wore.

"My lord, without giving offense, there are one or two points it might be best if we clarified. I am a subject of Northcoast, but I am not a member of its court, and I am not here at the bidding of my king. I represent the Medean bank and only the Medean bank."

"A spy without a kingdom, then. So much the worse."

"I apologize, my lord," the banker said. "I see I am not welcome. Please forgive the trespass."

Paerin Clark bowed deeply and started toward the door, taking the court and Camnipol with him. *Just because you don't feel comfortable with it doesn't mean it's difficult,* Clara said in his memory.

"Wait," Dawson said, and took a deep breath. "Who's wearing the prettiest dress at the twice-damned ball?"

"Excuse me?"

"You came for a reason," Dawson said. "Don't be such a coward you abandon it the first time someone barks at you. Sit. Tell me what you have to tell."

Paerin Clark came and sat. His eyes seemed darker now, his face as blank as a man at cards.

"It isn't you," Dawson said, sitting across the table and ripping off a crust of the bread. "Not as a man. It's what you are."

"I'm the man Komme Medean sends when there's a problem," Paerin Clark said. "No more, no less."

"You're an agent of chaos," Dawson said, softly, trying to pull the sting from the words. "You're a man who makes poor men rich and rich men poor. Rank and order mean nothing to men like you, and they mean everything to men like me. It isn't you I disdain. It's only what you are."

The banker laced his fingers across his knee.

"Will you hear my news, my lord? Despite what you think I am?"

"I will."

For the better part of an hour, the banker spoke in a low voice, detailing the slow landslide that was happening in Camnipol. As Dawson had suspected, Simeon's unwillingness to commit his son as the ward of any house came from the fear of making waves. The respect for his kingship was failing on all sides. Daskellin and his remaining allies offered what support they could, but even within the ranks of the faithful, unease was growing. Issandrian and Klin remained in exile, but Feldin Maas was everywhere in the city. It seemed as if the man never slept, and wherever he went, the story he told was the same: the attack of the show fighters had been rigged to throw disgrace on Curtin Issandrian in order that the prince not be sent to his house. The implication was that the convenient appearance of the soldiers from Vanai had been part of a great theater piece.

"Arranged by me," Dawson said.

"Not you alone, but yes."

"Lies, beginning to end," Dawson said.

"Not everyone believes it. But some do."

Dawson rubbed his forehead with the palm of his hand. Outside, the day was leaning toward night, the sunlight reddening. It was all as he suspected. And Clara was riding into the center of it. The hope she'd offered before she'd left had sounded risky at the time. After this report, it seemed merely naïve. He would have given his hand to have had the banker come a week earlier. Now it was too late. He could as well wish a thrown rock back into his hand.

"Simeon?" Dawson asked. "Is he well?"

"The hard times wear on him," Paerin Clark said. "And, I think, on his son."

"I think it isn't death that kills us," Dawson said. "I think it's fear. And Asterilhold?"

"My sources tell me that Maas is in contact with several important men in the court there. There have been loans of gold, and promises of support."

"He's raising an army."

"He is."

"And Canl?"

"He's trying to, yes."

"How long before it comes down to the field?"

"No one can know that, my lord. If you're careful and lucky, maybe never."

"I can't think that's true," Dawson said. "We have Asterilhold on one hand and you on the other."

"No, my lord," the banker said, "you don't. We both know I came hoping for advantage, but an Antean civil war won't profit us. If it does come to pass, we won't take a side. I've done what I can here. I

won't be going back to Camnipol."

Dawson sat up straighter. The banker was smiling now, and it looked suspiciously like pity.

"You've abandoned Daskellin? *Now?*"

"This is one of the great kingdoms of the world," Paerin Clark said, "but my employer plays his games on larger boards than that. I wish you the best of luck, but Antea is yours to lose. Not mine. I'm traveling south."

"South? What's more important than this in the south?"

"There's an irregularity that needs my attention in Porte Oliva."

Cithrin

Cithrin stood at the top of the seawall, the city spread out behind her and the vast blue of sea and sky ahead. At the edge where the pale, shallow water of the bay turned to deep blue, five ships stood. The towering masts were trees rising from the water. The furled sails thickened the spars. The small, shallow boats of the fishing fleet were rushing into port or else out of the traffic as dozens of guide boats raced out, fighting to be the first to reach the ships and take the honor of guiding them in.

The trade ships from Narinisle had arrived. Five ships, arriving together and flying the banners of Birancour and Porte Oliva. When they had left, there had been seven. The other two might have become separated by storm or choice or scattered in an attack. They might arrive the next day or the next week or never. On the docks below her, merchants waited in agonies of hope and fear, waiting for the ships to come near enough to identify. And then, once the ships were in their berths, the fortunate among the sponsors would board, compare contracts and bills of lading, and discover whether profits were assured. The unfortunate would wait on the docks or in the port taprooms, digging at the sailors for news.

And then, once the captains of the ships had answered their sponsors, once the laborers had begun the long business of hauling the goods from ship to warehouse, once the frenzy of trade and goods and the exchange of coin had passed over Porte Oliva like a wind across the water, it would be time to begin the preparation for the next year's journey. Shipyards would make repairs. The new sponsors would offer contracts and terms to the captains. And Idderrigo Bellind Siden, Prime Governor of Porte Oliva, would consult with the captains and the masters of the guilds, and graciously accept the proposals to change this from one port city among many to the center of trade for a generation to come.

And in her hand, written in green ink on paper as smooth as poured cream, was the letter that forbade her from being part of any of it. She opened it now and considered it again. It was ciphered, of course, but she had spent long enough with Magister Imaniel's books and papers that she could read it as clearly as if it had been in a normal script.

Magistra Cithrin bel Sarcour, you are to cease all negotiation and trade in our name immediately. Paerin Clark, a senior auditor and representative of the holding company, will attend you as soon as can be arranged. Until

that time, no further contracts, deposits, or loans are to be made or accepted. This is unconditional.

It was signed by Komme Medean himself, the old man's script jagged and shaking from gout. She had shown it to no one. In the eight days since it had come, she'd wrestled with the order. It was the first she'd ever had from the holding company, and precisely what she'd expected. The auditor would come, just as she'd planned at the start. He would recover the bank's funds, lost from Vanai. All her daydreams of keeping the bank alive, or steering it the way the guide boats were now preparing to lead the trade ships to safety, would end. She would be herself again. Not Tag the Carter, not a smuggler hiding in the shadows, and not Magistra Cithrin. Only without Besel and Cam and Magister Imaniel. Without Vanai.

And so, with respect, she preferred not to.

With a soft breath too slight to call itself a sigh, she ripped the page. Then again, and again, and again. When the pieces were as small as individual numbers and symbols of the cipher, she threw them over the edge of the seawall and watched them spin and flutter.

On the water, the guide boats were crowded around the trade ships. She imagined the voices of the men shouting up to the captains, the captains shouting back. As she watched, the first of the ships began the short, final leg of its annual journey. She turned away and walked back to her bank. The front door stood open to the breeze. As she walked through, Roach jumped to his feet as if she'd caught him doing something. Behind him, Yardem stretched and yawned hugely.

"Where have you been?" Captain Wester said.

"Watching the trade ships arrive, just the same as everyone else in the city," she said. She felt unaccountably light. Almost giddy.

"Well, your coffee brewer sent three people on from the café so far this morning asking after you. They came looking here."

"What did you tell them?"

"That you were busy, but I expected you'd be back in the café after midday," Wester said. "Was I lying?"

"You? Never," she said, and laughed at the suspicion on his face.

Despite the heat, Cithrin wore a dark blue dress with full sleeves and a high collar to the meeting at the governor's palace. Her hair was tucked into a soft cap and pinned in place with a silver-and-lapis hairpin that was from the last of the jewelry she had hauled from Vanai. It would have been more appropriate for a cool day in autumn and left a trickle of sweat running down her back, but the thought of something more revealing in front of Qahuar Em seemed uncomfortable. And of course wearing the necklace or brooch that

he'd given her would have been inappropriate.

When he greeted her in the passageway outside the private rooms, his bow was formal. Only the angle of his smile and the merriment in his dark eyes gave a hint of their nights together. He wore a sand-colored tunic with black enameled buttons to the neck, and she found herself aware of the shape of his body beneath it. She wondered, now that they weren't to be rivals any longer, what would become of the attachment. The servant, a pale-haired Cinnae woman, bowed as they went through the doorway.

A single dark-stained table dominated the room, a bank of windows behind it looking out into the branches of a tree. The shifting branches gave the room a sense of shadow and cool that it didn't deserve. The Cinnae mercenary rose to his feet as Cithrin stepped into the room and sat again when she did. The Tralgu woman and the representative of the local merchant houses didn't attend.

"Good year," the Cinnae man said. "Have you been down to the ships, Magistra?"

"I haven't had the opportunity," Cithrin said. "My schedule's been remarkably full."

"You should make the time. There were boxes of the most fascinating baubles this year. Little globes of colored glass that chime when you rub them. Quite lovely. I bought three for my granddaughter."

"I hope the world has been treating you gently, sir," Qahuar Em said. His voice was almost sharp. *Why would he be angry?* she wondered.

"Quite well," the Cinnae said, ignoring the tone. "Quite excellently well, thank you."

The private door slid open and the governor stepped in. His round face was sweat-sheened, but cheerful. When they began to rise, he waved them back to their seats.

"No need for ceremony," he said, easing himself into his own chair. "Can I offer any of you something to drink?"

Qahuar Em shook his head, the Cinnae mercenary doing the same half a moment later as if he'd been waiting to see what Qahuar would do. Cithrin's belly tightened in warning. Something was going on that she didn't understand.

"Thank you both for coming," the governor said. "I very much appreciate the work you have all done, and your dedication to Porte Oliva, to me, and to the queen. I am excited to have such excellent minds turning toward the welfare of the city. This is always the most difficult part, isn't it? Making the decision?"

His wistful sigh said he was enjoying himself. Cithrin answered with a tight smile. Qahuar wasn't meeting her eyes.

“I have been over the proposals very carefully,” the governor said. “Either of them would have been, I think, an excellent pathway to the prosperity of the city. But I think the flexibility of the five-year contract offered by the gentlemen here present would better serve than the eight that the Medean bank requires.”

Cithrin felt her breath leave her. Despite the heat, something cold settled into her throat and breast. Qahuar Em hadn’t been offering five years. It had been ten.

“Eight years is a very long time,” the Cinnae mercenary said, nodding slowly. His grave expression was a poor mask for his pleasure.

“Between that and the somewhat higher annual fees,” the governor said, “I am very sorry to turn away your proposal, Magistra Cithrin.”

“I quite understand,” Cithrin said as if someone else were speaking. “Now that it’s settled, might I enquire what rates Master Em offered?”

“Oh, it’s a partnership,” the Cinnae said. “Not just his clan, you know. We’re in this together, he and I.”

“I can’t think that there’s need to go into the details,” Qahuar Em said, still not looking at her. His attempts to spare her more humiliation were worse than the mercenary’s gloating.

“It isn’t as though it won’t be known,” the governor said. “Out of courtesy and respect, Magistra, the fees asked were ten hundredths without guarantee or fourteen with.”

The wrong numbers. They were the wrong numbers. It was supposed to be sixteen and nineteen, not ten and fourteen. The offer she’d found in his office had been a trap, and she had fallen into it.

“Thank you, my Lord Governor,” Cithrin said with a nod. “The holding company will very much appreciate your candor.”

“There will be no acrimony, I hope,” the governor said. “The Medean bank is new to our city, but very much honored.”

“None at all,” Cithrin said. Given the hollowness in her chest, she was surprised the words didn’t echo. This couldn’t be happening. “Thank you very much for the courtesy of meeting with me. But I assume you gentlemen have details to discuss.”

They all rose when she did, the governor taking her hand in his greasy fingers and pressing it to his lips. She kept her smile amused and world-wise in defeat, a mask of who she wished she had been. She bowed to the Cinnae mercenary and then to Qahuar Em. The emptiness in her shifted, and something painful bloomed in its place.

She walked carefully from the room, down the stairs, and out through the entrance hall to the square beyond. The sky was an opalescent white, the breeze hot as breath against her cheek. The sweat dampened her armpits, her back, her legs. She stood for a few minutes, confused and stunned. She wasn’t supposed to be here. She

needed to get back inside. There were details she needed to work out, contracts to be signed and witnessed. There was the great project to be done. She wasn't supposed to be out here. She should be inside.

The first sob was like retching: sudden, reflexive, and violent. *Not here,* she thought. *Oh, God, if it's going to happen, don't let it happen here where the whole damned city can watch.* Long, fast strides, her thighs pulling against the fabric of her dress to gain every inch. She reached the mazework streets. She found an alleyway, followed its turns and windings to a shadowed corner, and squatted there on the filthy paving stones. She couldn't stop the sobs now, so she pressed her arm against her mouth to keep them quiet.

She'd lost. All of her expectations, all of her plans, and she'd lost. They'd given her contract to someone else, and left her a stupid, ugly half-breed slut crying herself dry in an alley. How had she thought she could win? How could she ever have believed?

When the worst had passed, she stood again. She wiped the tears and snot on her sleeve, wiped the grime off her dress, and began the walk to her rooms. Humiliation rose on her shoulders and whispered in her ear. How much did Qahuar tell his partners? Did he brag about getting her legs apart? That old Cinnae mercenary had likely had every part of her flesh described to him before she'd walked into the room. Qahuar had known everything she'd done before she did it, planned it. Had his servants been warned not to interfere with her late-night invasion of his office? Had they been watching from the shadows, laughing at the idiot girl who thought herself clever?

At the bank, she heard the voices of the guards—Marcus and Yardem and the new Kurtadam woman—through the door, neither angry nor laughing. The tulips bobbed in the breeze, their petals broken and splayed, the red turning black at the base. She wanted to go in, but her hand would not reach for the latch. She stood for what seemed like hours, willing herself to go in to the nearest thing she had to friends or family or love. Her employees. She wanted Yardem Hane to come out and find her. For Cary to come walking down the street. For Opal to rise from her ocean grave and choke her to death where she stood.

Cithrin went upstairs. She stripped off her dress and sat on the bed in her shift. Her sweat wouldn't dry, wouldn't cool her.

She'd lost. Even now, it didn't make sense. She couldn't quite bring herself to believe it. She'd lost. The weeping was gone now. The pain was gone, though she had the sense that it was only resting, sleeping like a hunting cat after a kill. It would be back. For the moment, she felt nothing. She felt dead.

She'd lost. And the auditor was coming.

The sun traced its arc through the high air. Cithrin sat. The sounds

of the street changed, the heat-dazed traffic of the day slowly giving way to the brighter, more energetic voices of evening. She needed to piss, but she put it off. Impossible to think there was any moisture left in her after soaking in sweat and tears. And still, her body performed its functions whether she approved or not. When the urging became too much to ignore, she found her night pot and used it. Once she was in motion, it was easier to move. She pulled off her shift, leaving it puddled on the floor, and found a light, embroidered dress, more attractive because it was already in her hands. She pulled it on, walked down the stairs and out into the street without bothering to lock the door behind her.

The taproom had all the shutters open, the sea breeze passing through it. No candles or lanterns were lit to keep even that slight additional heat away, so the rooms were dim despite the sunlight. The servant girl was one she recognized, thick-faced with night-black hair down to her shoulder blades. A tiny dog pranced nervously around the girl's ankles. Cithrin walked toward the back table, her table. Someone was there, half hidden by the rough cloth.

Qahuar Em.

Cithrin forced herself to walk forward. She sat across from him. A loose shutter clapped against its frame twice and went quiet. The man's expression was mild and rueful. A half-empty tankard of ale rested on the table.

"Good evening."

She didn't answer. He clicked his tongue against his teeth.

"I was hoping I might offer you a meal, a bottle of wine. An apology. It was unkind of the governor to bring you in that way."

"I don't want anything from you," she said.

"Cithrin—"

"I don't want sight or sound of you ever again for as long as I live," she said, each word cool and sharp and deliberate. "And if you come near me, I will ask my captain of guard to kill you. And he'd do it."

Qahuar's expression hardened.

"I see. I admit I am disappointed, Magistra. I'd thought better of you."

"*You'd* thought better of *me*?"

"Yes. I hadn't imagined you the sort of woman to throw tantrums. But clearly I've misjudged. I would remind you that you were the one who put yourself in my bed. You are the one who crept through my halls. It's mean and small of you to blame me for anticipating it."

You don't know what this was, Cithrin thought. *You don't know what it meant for me. They're going to take away my bank.*

Qahuar stood and placed three small coins on the table to pay the taproom. The light caught the roughness of his bronze skin, making

him look older. This summer was her eighteenth solstice. It was his thirty-fifth.

"We're traders, Magistra," he said. "I very much apologize that the delivery of the news was unpleasant, but I cannot be sorry that I can take this agreement to my clan elders. I hope you have a more pleasant evening."

He pushed back the bench, wood rasping against the stone floor, and stepped around her.

"Qahuar," she said sharply.

He paused. She gathered herself. The words were cast in lead, almost too heavy to pull up her throat.

"I'm sorry I betrayed you," she said. "Tried to betray you."

"Don't be," he said. "It's the game we play."

Some time later, the taproom's servant came, took up the coins, and cleared away Qahuar Em's drink. Cithrin looked up at her.

"Your usual?"

Cithrin shook her head. Everything from her throat down to her belly felt solid as stone. She lifted her hand, surprised to find her soft cap still there. She pulled it off, let down her hair, and held the silver-and-lapis pin up. It seemed almost to glow with its own light in the gloom. The servant girl blinked at it.

"That's very beautiful," she said.

"Take it," Cithrin said. "Bring me what you think it's worth."

"Magistra?"

"Fortified wine. Farmer's beer. I don't care. Just bring it."

Geder

The high priest—Basrahip or possibly *the* Basrahip, it was hard to tell—leaned back on his leather-and-iron stool. His thick, powerful fingers rubbed at his forehead. Around them, the candles flickered and hissed, their smoke filling the room with the smell of burning fat. Geder licked his lips.

"My first tutor was a Tralgu," he said.

Basrahip pursed his lips, considered Geder, and shook his wide head. *No.* Geder swallowed his delight and tried again.

"I learned to swim at the seashore."

The broad head shook slowly. *No.*

"I had a favorite dog when I was young. A hunting beast named Mo."

The high priest's smile was beatific. His teeth seemed almost unnaturally wide. He pointed a thick finger at Geder's chest.

"Yes," he said.

Geder clapped his hands and laughed. It wasn't the first time the high priest had made the demonstration, but it was always a source of amazement. No matter what the lie, no matter what voice Geder told it in, how he held his body or changed the pitch of his voice, the huge man knew which words were false and which true. He never guessed incorrectly.

"And it's really a goddess that lets you do this?" Geder said. "Because I never came across a reference to that. The Righteous Servant was supposed to have been something Morade created, like the thirteen races and the dragon's roads."

"No. We were here before the dragons. When the great web was strung and the stars hung upon it, the goddess was present. The Sinir Kushku is her gift to the faithful. When the great collapse came, the dragons were fearful of her power. They fought against each other, each wishing the friendship and patronage of the Sinir Kushku for himself. The great Morade pretended an alliance, but the goddess knew when treachery came into his heart. She guided us here, where we might be safe, far from the world and its struggles, to wait until the time came for our return."

"This is totally unlike any account I ever read," Geder said.

"Do you doubt me?" Basrahip asked, his voice low and gentle and with the strange throbbing that seemed to inflect all his speech.

"Not at all," Geder said. "I'm amazed! A whole era before the

dragons? It's something no one has written about. Not that I've ever seen."

Outside the small stone room, the stars glittered in the sky and the crescent moon lit the cascade of stones. In the darkness, Geder could almost imagine the great stone dragon above the temple wall moving, turning its head. The odd green crickets that infested the temple sang in shuddering chorus. Geder wrapped his arms around his legs, grinning.

"I cannot tell you how pleased I am that I found this place," Geder said.

"You are an honored man of a great nation," the high priest said. "I am pleased that you have come so far to find our humble temple."

Geder waved the comment away, embarrassed. It had taken the better part of a day to explain that, while he was nobility, *prince* was a particular title where he came from, and couldn't be applied so widely. He'd spent most of his life being called *lord* and *my lord,* and even though it meant the same thing, *honored man of a great nation* left him self-conscious.

Basrahip rose and stretched as, in the distance, a harsh voice screeched out the call to night prayer. Gerder expected Basrahip to make his excuses and hurry out to lead the priests in their rituals. Instead, he paused in the doorway, candles casting shadows over his eyes.

"Tell me, Lord Geder. What was it you most hoped to find here?"

"Well, I wanted to see if I could find the Sinir mountains and some source material about the Righteous Servant for a speculative essay I'm drafting up."

"This is what you *most* hoped to find?"

"Yes," Geder said. "It is."

"And now that you have found it, it will be enough?"

"Of course," Geder said.

The big man's gaze locked on him, and Geder felt a blush rising in his neck and cheeks. Basrahip waited for what seemed half a day, then shook his head.

"No," he said gently. "No, there is something else."

The days since Geder's arrival at the temple had been astounding and rich and unnerving as a dream. For two full days from morning until nightfall, he had stood in the great court between the temple itself and the gated wall. A dozen pale-robed priests with long hair and full beards sat around him as he drew maps and tried to summarize centuries of history. Often when they asked questions of him, he had to admit his ignorance. How had the borders of Asterilhold and

Northcoast been set? Who claimed the islands south of Birancour and west of Lyoneia? Why were the Firstblood centered in Antea, the Cinnae in Princip C'Annaldé, and the Timzinae in Elassae when Tralgu and Dartinae had no particular homeland? Why were the Timzinae called *bugs,* the Kurtadam *clickers,* and the Jasuru *pennies?* What names were the Firstblood known by, and by whom were they hated?

They seemed particularly intrigued by the Timzinae. Geder prided himself on knowing a great deal. Having his limits exposed was humbling, but the thirst the olive-skinned men had for every scrap of information made it bearable. Every story and anecdote he gave them, they were fascinated by.

He found himself telling them his own past. His life as a boy in Rivenhalm. His father and the court in Camnipol. The Vanai campaign and how it ended and the mercenary attack on Camnipol, traveling the Keshet.

When the sun grew too hot to bear, the priests brought out a huge half-tent of stretched leather and wide wooden beams that shaded Geder and rose behind him like a gigantic hand. They hauled out wide-mouthed ceramic pots of damp sand that kept the buried gourds of water cool. Geder chewed lengths of dried goat meat spiced with salt and cinnamon, talking until his throat was hoarse. They stopped as the sun slid behind the peaks, answering the harsh, barking call. Geder's servants made camp for him there and slept on the ground beside him. And then, on the third day when he was certain his voice would fail him, Basrahip—the Basrahip—came to him and motioned that he should follow. The huge man led him up stone stairways worked smooth as glass by generations of leather-shod feet, through the wide passage as much cave mouth as corridor.

He had expected carved stone, but Geder didn't see any sign that the halls had been touched by hammer and chisel. They might have grown this way, as if the mountains had known they would be home to these men. Lanterns of paper and parchment sat in alcoves and spilled their light over the floors and across the curved ceilings. The air smelled rich with something Geder couldn't quite identify, part manure and part spice. The air was so hot it stifled. He trotted through the twists and turns until the passage widened and the high priest stepped aside.

The great chamber was taller than twenty men standing one atop the other. The ceiling was lost in darkness more profound than night. And towering above them, the carved statue of a huge spider covered in beaten gold and lit by a hundred torches. Fifty men at least knelt at its base, all of them turned toward Geder, their hands folded on their shoulders. Geder stood, his mouth slack. No king in the world could boast a grander spectacle.

“The goddess,” Basrahip had said, and his voice had echoed through the space, filling it. “Mistress of truth and unbroken ruler of the world. We are blessed by her presence.”

Geder barely noticed when the huge man’s hand touched his shoulder and began to press him gently but implacably down. When he knelt, it seemed like the obvious thing to do.

After that, he was taken to new quarters within the temple walls. Many of the doors and windows he’d seen when he first came went no deeper than a single room, or at most two, the priests’ cells clinging to the side of the mountain. Geder’s squire brought him a basin to bathe in, his books, and the small traveling desk, and lit his lantern. He lay in the darkness that night, a thin wool blanket around him, and sleep a day’s ride away. He was too excited to sleep. His only disappointment was that the temple had no library.

On the fourth morning, Basrahip came again, and their conversation began, and it had continued every day since.

I don’t understand why you stay hidden.”

“Don’t you?” Basrahip said.

They were walking down the thin brick-paved path that led to the temple’s well.

“The Righteous Servant,” Geder said. “It’s something that you all have. If you were in the world, you could tell whenever a merchant was lying about his costs. Or when your men were unfaithful. And life in court. God, what you could do there.”

“And that is why we stay hidden,” Basrahip said. “When we have involved ourselves in the affairs of the world, we have seen the rewards of it. Blades and fire. Those who have not been touched by the goddess live lives of deceit. For them, to hear our voices is to die as the people they were. Her enemies are many, and ruthless.”

Geder kicked at a pebble, sending it skittering down ahead of them. The sunlight pressed down on his face and shoulders.

“But you are going to go back out,” Geder said. “You said that you were waiting for the time to go back out.”

“We will,” the high priest said. They reached the edge of the well, a stone-lined hole in the earth with a rope tied to the stake sunk deep beside it. “When we are forgotten.”

“That could be any time in the last century,” Geder said, but the high priest went on as if he hadn’t spoken.

“When the wounds of the old war are healed and we can walk the world without fear, She will send us a sign. She will sort clean from unclean, and end the age of lies.”

Basrahip squatted, taking the rope in his hands and hauling, hand

over hand, until it came up wet. The bucket had been copper once, given over now to verdigris. Basrahip tipped it up to his lips and drank, rivulets falling from the corner of his mouth. Geder shifted uncomfortably beside him. The high priest put the bucket down and wiped the back of his hand across his lips.

"Are you troubled, Lord?"

"I'm… It's nothing."

The wide smile was cool. The dark eyes considered him.

"Listen to me, Lord Palliako. Listen to my voice. You can trust me."

"I'm only… Could I have a drink of that water too?"

Basrahip lifted the bucket up to him. Geder took it in both hands, drinking slowly. The water was cool and tasted of stone and metal. He handed it back, and Basrahip held it out over the blackness for a moment before he let it drop. The rope slithered as it sped back down. The splash was louder than Geder had expected.

"You can trust me," the high priest said again.

"I know," Geder said.

"You can tell me. Nothing bad will come of it."

"Tell you what? I mean, I'm not sure what you're saying."

"Yes you are," the man said, and started back toward the temple. Geder trotted to keep up. "Why did you come looking for the Sinir Kushku? What was it that drew you here?"

"You mean…"

"Through the ages, other men have found us here. Stumbled upon us. You came *seeking.* What was it that led you here?"

Two of the younger priests passed them, heading toward the well. Geder cracked his knuckles and frowned. He tried to remember what had started him. When was the first time he'd heard the legend? But perhaps that in itself didn't matter.

"Everywhere I turn," he said, the words coming slowly, "it seems like things are lies. I don't know who my friends are, not really. I don't know who gave me Vanai. Or who in Camnipol would want me killed. Everything in court seems like a game, and I'm the only one who doesn't know the rules."

"You are not a man of deceit."

"No. I am. I have been. I've lied and hidden things. I know how easy it is."

Basrahip stopped, leaning against a boulder. The wide face was impassive. Almost serene. Geder crossed his arms. A stirring of anger warmed his chest.

"I've been a token in everyone else's game," Geder said. "My whole life, I've been the one they tricked into sitting on sawn boards over the shit hole. I've been the one they laughed at. They burned my book. Alan Klin burned my *book.*"

“Did that bring you here?”

“Yes. No. I mean, when I was a boy, I used to tell myself stories like the old histories. Where I led an army into a doomed battle and won. Or saved the queen. Or went to the underworld and pulled my mother back from the dead. And every time I’ve gone into the world, it’s disappointed me. Do you know what that’s like?”

“I do,” the high priest said. “You didn’t come here to write an essay, Lord Geder. You came here to find us. To find me.”

Geder felt his mouth in a grim, hard scowl.

“I did,” he said. “Because I want to know the truth. Because I am sick to death of wondering. All the lies and deceits and games that everyone plays around me? I want to be the one man who can cut it away and find the truth. And so I heard about the end of all doubt.”

“Would knowing alone be enough? Would it bring you peace?”

“It would,” Geder said.

Basrahip paused, listening. A fly whined around them, landed on the big man’s wide head to drink his sweat, and flew away again.

“It wouldn’t,” Basrahip said, hauling himself back to his feet. “That isn’t what you want. But you are coming closer, Lord Geder. Much closer.”

I heard them talking,” one of his servants whispered. “They’re going to kill us all in our sleep.”

Geder sat in the darkness of his cell. The whispers were supposed to be quiet enough to escape him. If he’d been back in his cot, they would have. Instead, he’d slipped out and padded across the dark floor on silent feet. His back was to the wall beside the doorway, his servants not seven feet away.

“Stop talking shit,” his squire said. “You’re just scaring yourself.”

“I’m not,” the first voice said again, higher and tighter this time. “You think they want people knowing where they are? You think they’re at the ass end of the world because they want company?”

A third voice said something, but he couldn’t make out the words.

“And let them,” the first voice said. “What I heard, he burned down Vanai just because he could, and laughed while he did it.”

“Keep talking about his lordship that way and it won’t be these sand monkeys in priest robes that kill you,” his squire’s voice said. “I’ll face down a hundred false gods before I cross him.”

Geder hugged his knees closer. He expected to feel hurt, but the pain didn’t come. Or anger. He rose to his feet, walking without any attempt to be quiet. He heard the silence of the servants outside his door, but he didn’t care about them. Not what they thought, not what they were, not if they lived. He found his tunic and a pair of leggings

and pulled them on in the darkness. He didn't bother trying to get the stays all tied. Modesty was preserved, and that was enough. Basrahip wouldn't mind.

When he walked out into the starlit dark, his servants were pretending to sleep. He stepped over them, walking the narrow path along the mountainside, the dirt cooling his feet and the stones biting them. In the first cell he reached where a monk slept, he shook the man awake.

"Take me to Basrahip," he said.

The high priest slept deeper in the temple. His rooms were dark, the pallet he slept on hardly big enough to accommodate him. The monk who'd brought Geder set down his candle and backed out of the room bowing. Basrahip tucked one massive leg under himself and sat up. He seemed perfectly alert. Geder cleared his throat.

"I've been thinking. About what you asked. I want to master the court. I want the men who used me to suffer," he said. "I want them to beg my forgiveness. I want them humiliated where the world can point at them and pity them and laugh."

The high priest didn't move, and then, slowly, he grinned. He lifted a massive finger and pointed it at Geder.

"Yes. Yes, that is what you want. And tell me this, my friend. My brother. Would that be enough?"

"It'll do for a start."

The high priest threw his head back and howled with laughter. As he grinned, his teeth shone white as ivory in the candlelight. He stood, wrapping his blanket around him, and Geder found himself grinning too. Saying the words, having them understood, was like taking a stone off his chest.

"I had hoped, Lord Geder," the high priest said. "From the moment I saw you—an honored man from a great kingdom—I *hoped* that this was the time. That you would be the sign the goddess sent, and you are. Brother Geder, you are. You have found your truth, and if you will honor it, so shall I."

"Honor it?"

"Camnipol. Your great city at the heart of your empire. Pledge her a temple there, a first temple in a new age free from lies and doubt. I will return with you myself, and through me…"

The huge man held out his hands, palms up. With the candle on the floor, it was as if he were offering handfuls of shadow. Geder couldn't stop grinning. He felt light and uncomplicated and alive in a way he hadn't since he'd scooped gems from frozen boxes half a year before.

"Through me," the high priest said, "she will give you what you want."

Clara Annalie Kalliam Baroness of Osterling Fells

My lady," the Tralgu door slave said, bowing.

"Good morning, Andrash," Clara said, stretching the kinks out of her back. "I can't begin to tell you how good it is to be back in the city. I do love the holding in its own right, but it simply wasn't built for the summer sun. Vincen will be… You remember Vincen? He'll be seeing to the things we brought, if you could find someone to help him?"

"Yes, my lady. Your sons are, I believe, in the summer garden."

"Sons?"

"Captain Barriath arrived some days ago," the slave said.

"Jorey and Barriath in the same house. Well, *that* can't have been pleasant."

The door slave smiled.

"It is good to have you back, my lady."

Clara patted the old man's arm as she left the heat and warmth of their private square for the dim and cool of the mansion proper. She saw at once how things had slipped. The flowers in the hall vases were wilted. The floor had a layer of grit blown in by the wind and not yet washed away. The air was close and stuffy the way it got when the windows had stayed shut for too many days in a row. Jorey had been much too amiable with the house staff. Or else he was growing to be as oblivious as his dear father. Either way, something would have to be done.

She heard the boys' voices before she reached the garden. Jorey's voice was higher, shriller, more demanding. Barriath tended to spit his arguments as if they tasted bad. From the time Jorey had had words, the two had been like fire and rain to each other, but they were devoted to one another. Clara had had much the same relationship with her own sister. *No one can harm her but me, and I shall destroy her.* Love was so often like that.

At the steps down into the summer garden, she paused.

"Because it's *simplistic,* that's why," Jorey said. "There's a hundred things happening, and they all tie into each other. Now that there isn't going to be a farmer's council, are we facing another grain revolt? If Northcoast's really on the edge of another round of succession wars, will Asterilhold be distracted from us? Are the new Hallskari ship designs going to mean more piracy in Estinport and less in Tauendak? You can't take everything like that and press it down into one thing.

The world's more complex than that."

"There are fewer choices than you believe, brother," Barriath said. "You won't find someone against the farmers and supporting Asterilhold. If you want one, you take the other. No family will forbid mixing races and also trade with Borja. The king isn't like a sculptor with a fresh stone, able to make whatever he sees fit. He's like a man walking into a sculptor's yard picking from what's already there."

"And you think the prince is the only way he can show his favor?"

"The only one that matters," Barriath said. "If his majesty gave every favor and grant he has to Daskellin, and sent Aster to be the ward of Maas, he'd still be saying that in the long term, the kingdom will be shaped by Maas's vision. That's why Issandrian—"

"But if the king—"

The two voices intertwined, neither boy listening to other, and the threads of their arguments tangled into a single ugly knot. Clara stepped out into the garden and put her hands on her hips in feigned accusation.

"If this is how you greet your poor mother, I should have fostered you both with wolves," she said.

Her boys both grinned and came to embrace her. They were men now, strong-armed and smelling of musk and hair oil. It seemed like only the week before that she'd been able to take them in her arms. Then they started in again, talking over each other, only now the melee of words seemed to center on her and why she was there rather than the politics of the court. Clara beamed at them both and stepped down into the lush green and pale blooms of the summer garden. The fountain, at least, had been maintained, water splashing down the front of a contemplative if underdressed cast bronze Cinnae woman. Clara sat at the fountain's lip and began pulling off her traveling jacket.

"Your father, poor thing, is gnawing his foot off back at home, and as a favor to him and myself, I have come to keep up some semblance of normalcy. This idiotic bickering has cost me the better part of the season already, and I simply must see dear Phelia."

Jorey leaned against an ivied wall. Arms crossed and scowling, he looked like the image of his father. Barriath sat beside her and laughed.

"I have missed you. No other woman would call the first armed conflict on the streets of Camnipol in five generations idiotic bickering," he said.

"I am just as sorry as anyone about what happened to dear Lord Faskellin," Clara said, sharply. "But I defy you to call it anything besides idiotic."

"Peace, Mother, peace," Barriath said. "You're quite right, of course.

It's only that no one else puts it that way."

"Well, I can't think why they don't," Clara said.

"Does Father know you're going to call on Maas?" Jorey asked.

"He does, and before you start, I am to be guarded the whole time, so please don't bother with the monster stories of Lord Maas and all the terrible thing he's like to do to me."

Her two boys looked at one another.

"Mother," Jorey began, and she cut him off with a wave of her hand. She turned pointedly to her eldest son.

"I assume you've taken leave from the fleet, Barriath dear. How is poor Lord Skestinin and that painted shrew he had the poor judgment to marry?"

The streets of the city were full and busy. Carriage wheels clattered over the cobblestones. In the market, butchers sold meat and bakers, bread. Petty criminals scooped shit out of the alleys and off the pavement, guarded by swordsmen wearing the king's colors if not precisely his livery. The cherry trees that lined the streets sported green fruit with real threats of red. Workmen hung out over the Division, repairing and maintaining the very bridges from which they were suspended. She had not thought it possible that a city could look as it had in better times, sound as it had, smell as it had, and still be bent double under the weight of fear. She had been wrong.

It showed in small things. Merchants too quick to laugh, altercations over precedence and right of way, and the stony expression common to everyone in the city when they thought no one was watching. Even the horses smelled something, their huge, liquid eyes a fraction too wide and their gait just barely skittish.

She'd chosen to take a sedan chair open on the sides with four bearers and Vincen Coe walking beside it. Something had happened to the poor man's eye just before they'd left Osterling Fells, and the bruise had started to seep yellow and green down his cheek. He wore boiled leather studded with steel and both sword and dagger. It was more than a huntsman would sport, and with the recent injury, he looked quite thuggish.

The mansion of Feldin Maas shared a private courtyard with House Issandrian. Both gates were of the same gaudy ironwork, the houses themselves painted and adorned in such rich profusion they seemed designed by a cake maker gone mad. Curtin Issandrian, of course, was exiled just as her Dawson was, and he had taken all his family and servants with him. Her uncle Mylus had suffered a blow to the head when he was young and spent his life with half his face slack and empty. The square reminded Clara of him, all bustle and action on the

left and empty as death on the right.

Phelia stood at the top of the front steps. Her dress was purple velvet with silver thread all along the sleeves and collar. It should have been beautiful on her. Clara gave her shawl to the footman and went up to Phelia. Her cousin took her hands and smiled tightly.

"Oh, Clara," Phelia said. "I can't say how much I've missed you. This has been the most awful year. Please, come in."

Clara nodded to the door slave. It wasn't the Dartinae woman she was used to seeing, but a severe-looking Jasuru man. He didn't nod back. She stepped into the relative cool of the Maas front hall.

"Hey! Stop, you!"

Clara turned, surprised to be addressed in so curt a fashion, only to see that the comment had been directed at Vincen Coe. The Jasuru man was on his feet, his palm against Vincen's chest. The huntsman had gone unnaturally still.

"He's with me," Clara said.

"No one goes in armed," the door slave growled.

"You can wait here, Vincen."

"All respect, my lady," the huntsman said, his gaze still fastened to the Jasuru, "but no."

Clara put a hand to her cheek. Phelia had gone pale, her hands flitting one way and another like birds.

"Leave your blades, then," Clara said. And then to her cousin, "I assume we can rely on the rules of hospitality?"

"Of course," Phelia said. "Yes, of course. Of course you can."

Vincen Coe stood silent for a moment. Clara had to agree that Phelia would have been more convincing if she hadn't said it three times over. Vincen's hands went to his belt, undid the clasp, and handed it with sword and dagger still sheathed to the door slave. The Jasuru took it and nodded him through.

"I believe you've lost weight since I saw you last," Clara said, walking at Phelia's side. "Are you feeling well?"

Her answering smile was so brittle it cracked at the sides.

"It's been so hard. Ever since the king sent away Curtin and Alan—and you, of course. Ever since then, it's all been so hard. Feldin hardly sleeps anymore. I wish all this had never happened."

"Men," Clara said, patting Phelia's arm. The woman shied away, and then, as if realizing she ought not, permitted the touch with a nod. "Dawson's been beside himself. Really, you'd think the world was ending from the way he chews at every scrap of gossip."

"I love the king and God knows I'm loyal to the throne," Phelia said, "but Simeon's handled this all so badly, hasn't he? A brawl goes out of hand, and he sends people into exile? It only makes everyone feel there's something terrible happening. There doesn't have to be."

She turned up a wide flight of well-polished black stairs. Clara followed her. From the end of the hall they were leaving, Clara heard men's voices raised in argument but couldn't make out the words. One of the voices was Feldin Maas, but while the other seemed familiar, she couldn't put a name to it. She caught Vincen Coe's eye and nodded him down the hall.

Go find what you can.

He shook his head once. *No.*

Clara lifted her eyebrows, but by then they'd reached the landing. Phelia ushered them into the wide sitting room.

"You can wait here," Clara said at the doorway.

"If you wish, my lady," Vincen Coe said, and turned to stand with his back to the wall like a guard at his duty and didn't show the vaguest hint of going back down the stairs to investigate. It was all quite vexing.

The sitting room had been redone in shades of red and gold since the last time Clara had seen it, but it still had the low divan by the window that she preferred. And, like a good hostess, Phelia had a pipe prepared for her. Clara plucked up the bone and hardwood bowl and tamped a bit of tobacco into it.

"I don't know what to do any longer," Phelia said, sitting on the divan. She was leaning forward with her hands clasped between her knees like a child. "I tell myself things aren't so terribly bad, but then I wake up in the dark of the night and I can't get back to sleep. Feldin's never there. He comes to bed with me, but as soon as I'm asleep he goes back to his letters and his meetings."

"These are hard times," Clara said. She lit the pipe from a thin silver candle set there for the purpose and drew in the smoke.

"Curtin was going to take the prince on as his ward, you know. But now that he's gone, everyone's been scrambling. I think… I think Feldin may be named. I may be helping to raise a prince." Phelia giggled. "Can you imagine me raising a prince?"

"Aster's a boy," Clara said. "I've had three of them. One doesn't raise boys so much as try to keep fragile things out of their reach."

"Men aren't any different," Phelia said. "They never think about what might break."

Clara sucked on the stem of the pipe and blew out a cloud of sweet grey smoke before she spoke.

"That is the issue, isn't it? We have a problem, and it's spilled over from our court into Northcoast and Asterilhold. Sarakal and Hallskar are likely taking notice as well."

"I know it."

"Well then, dear," Clara said, keeping her voice light, "how shall we solve it?"

“I don’t know why it’s all such a concern. There were ages when Asterilhold, Antea, and Northcoast all answered to the High Kings. Everyone’s intermarried with everyone else. We’re practically a single kingdom already. When you think about it.”

“That is so utterly true,” Clara said, sitting beside her cousin. Phelia was plucking at her dress with her fingertips now, picking away threads and lint that weren’t there.

“I just don’t see why there should be any fuss about swords and bows and such. Nobody can possibly want that, can they? What would fighting gain anyone? It isn’t as if we aren’t already practically one kingdom.”

“Yes, but as long as there’s one throne in Camnipol and another in Kaltfel, they’ll rattle their swords at one another,” Clara said. “It’s what they do, isn’t it?”

Phelia started. Her eyes were wider than they should have been, and her hands gripped her knees until the blood was all gone from her knuckles. Now *that* was interesting. Clara cleared her throat and went on, pretending not to notice.

“The problem is how to give everyone a way to keep their honor intact without asking very much of them. I know Dawson won’t bring himself to see reason unless we can find a path to it that doesn’t involve stooping under something. I assume your Feldin’s very much the same.”

“But he’s won. Feldin feels he’s won, and if the prince does come to live with us…”

Clara waited.

“You know I admire Dawson,” Phelia said. “He’s always been so staunch. Even when he was being rude to Feldin, it was more from the way Dawson lives in the world as he would like it to be. I never thought it was out of anger or spite.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go so far as to call my darling husband a man without spite, but I take your meaning, yes.”

Phelia giggled nervously. Her shoulders were hunched like someone braced against a blow.

“Did you hear that Rania Hiren’s pregnant?” Phelia asked. Clara debated for less than a heartbeat, and decided to let her cousin change the subject.

“Not again. How many times is this?”

“Eight, if you count the live births. There were three stillborn.”

“I’m amazed she has the stamina,” Clara said. “And her husband must be a man of some quality. Rania’s the dearest soul under the sky, but after the twins, she did start to look a bit like a mop’s head. It isn’t her fault, of course. It’s just her skin.”

“I have the same sort, though,” Phelia said. “I dread to think what

I'll look like after my first child."

"You're young, dear. I'm sure you'll be able to get your figure back. I suppose it's rude for me to ask how work has been on that particular project?"

Phelia blushed, but she also relaxed. Bed gossip and the intricacies of the female flesh might be indelicate, but they were safer than politics and the rumors of war. Throughout the hour, Clara let them talk of nothing in particular, always leaving opportunities for Phelia to return them to the topic of their husbands and the threat hanging over the city like smoke from a fire. At no point did Phelia take the opportunities offered her. That said quite a bit in itself.

When the time came to take her leave, Clara found Vincen Coe precisely where he had been, scowling at the empty air. As they walked down the stairs, Phelia took Clara's arm, leaning into her with each step; the visit seemed to have calmed her as much as it had uneased Clara herself. At the door, Vincen reclaimed his blades from the Jasuru as Clara embraced Phelia in farewell. Her bearers brought the sedan chair to the ready, and Clara took her shawl back from the footman. It wasn't until she was out of the private square that the last of the tobacco ran out and Clara realized she'd accidentally stolen Phelia's pipe. She knocked the bowl clean on the side opposite from Vincen so as to keep the ashes from falling on him.

"You were eavesdropping, I assume?" she said, loudly enough to carry over the noise of the street.

"Not at all, my lady."

"Oh please, Vincen," she said. "I'm not dim. How much did you hear?"

A few moments later, the huntsman shrugged.

"Almost all, my lady. She spoke a bit softly when she was discussing her fertility problems, and you were laughing at the comments about Lord Sonnen's mistress."

"You heard the first part, then. About my husband and hers?"

"I did."

"Why do you suppose she would be concerned about Asterilhold and Antea sharing a common history? Being 'practically one kingdom'?"

"At a guess, my lady, because she expects they may be again."

He glanced at her, and his expression—guarded, calm, grim—told her that they were in agreement. Whatever the intricacies of blood and marriage, precedent and politics, Antea and Asterilhold could never be united while Simeon and Aster lived. And Phelia, never meaning to say it, thought unification possible. Even likely. And Aster was quite likely going to be living under her roof.

It seemed to follow that Feldin Maas and his foreign backers

intended to kill Prince Aster.

"Well," Clara said with a sigh. "So much for making peace."

Cithrin

Wind rattled the shutters and hissed at the windows. The morning sun was too bright to bear. By simply existing, the world made Cithrin want to vomit. She rolled over on her bed, pressing her hand to her throat. She didn't want to stand up, and she certainly wasn't walking to the Grand Market. The attempt alone would kill her.

There was a vague uneasiness muttering at the back of her mind, a reason that staying here would be a problem. She was supposed to go to the café because…

Because…

Cithrin said something obscene, then, without opening her eyes, repeated it slowly, drawing out the sounds. She was supposed to meet with a representative of the tanner's guild to talk about insuring their trade when the ships went back out. It wouldn't be long now. Days, perhaps. Not more than two weeks. Then the thrice-damned ships would go out, traveling up the coast while the season still held. They'd make their stops in the north, make what trades they could, and then hunker down for the winter, waiting for the ships from Far Syramys to reach the great island of Narinisle and begin the whole blighted thing over again. And so it would go, on and on and on until the end of all things, whether Cithrin got out of bed or not.

She sat up. Her rooms were in disarray around her. Bottles and empty wineskins crowded the floor. Another gust pushed against the windows, and she felt the air around her press in and then out. It was nauseating. She stood up slowly and walked across to look for a dress to put on that didn't stink of sweat. Sometime during the night, it appeared she'd knocked against the night pot, because a puddle of cold piss was well on its way to staining the floorboards. The only clothes that didn't look filthy were the trousers and rough shirt she'd worn as Tag the Carter. For what she had to do, they'd suffice. There were still half a dozen silver coins in her purse, and she shoved them into Tag's pocket.

By the time she reached the bottom of the stairs, she felt more nearly human. She stepped out into the street for a moment, then back in through the bank's front door.

"Roach," she said, and the little Timzinae jumped to attention.

"Magistra Cithrin," he said. "Captain Wester and Yardem just left to collect payment from the brewer just north of the wall and the two butchers in the salt quarter. Barth and Corisen Mout went with them.

Enen's asleep in the back because she drew night watch, and Ahariel is going to get some sausages and come back."

"I need you to run an errand for me," Cithrin said. "Go to the café and let the man from the tanner's guild know I won't be there. Tell him I'm unwell."

The boy's nictatating membranes clicked over his eyes nervously.

"Captain Wester said I should stay here," Roach said. "Enen's asleep, and he wanted someone awake in case—"

"I'll stay down here until someone gets back," Cithrin said. "I may feel like slow death, but I can still raise a shout if it's called for."

Roach still looked uncertain. Cithrin felt a stab of annoyance.

"I pay Wester," she said. "I pay you too, for that. Now *go*."

"Y-yes, Magistra."

The boy darted out to the street. Cithrin stood in the doorway for a long moment, watching the dark legs scissor and stretch as he ran. Far down the street, he dodged a cart loaded with fresh-caught fish, turned the corner, and vanished. Cithrin counted slowly to twelve, giving him time to reappear. When he didn't, she walked out into the street and pulled the door shut behind her. The wind was against her and kicking up bits of dust and straw, but she squinted her way to the taproom.

"Good morning, Magistra," the keeper said as her eyes adjusted to the gloom. "Back already?"

"Seems I am," she said, fishing the silver coins back out of her pocket. "I'll take what this buys."

The keeper took the coins, lifting and dropping his hand as he estimated their weight.

"Your boys know how to go through wine," he said.

"They don't drink it," she said, grinning. "It's all for me."

The man laughed. It was a new kind of lie she'd only just discovered, telling the bleak truth lightly and letting everyone around her mistake it for a joke. *They don't drink it; it's all for me. Come winter, I'm as likely to be in the stocks as free. Nothing I do matters.*

He came back with two dark bottles of wine and a small tun of beer. Cithrin tucked the tun under her arm, took a bottle in either hand, and waited as he opened he door for her. Now the wind was at her back, pushing her on like it wanted her to get back home. The sky was blue above her with a skin of white clouds high in the air, but it smelled like rain. Porte Oliva autumns had a reputation for rough weather, and summer was in its last days now. A little cloudburst now and again hardly seemed worth complaining about.

She didn't go back into the main rooms, heading for her own door instead. Maneuvering up the stairs was hard with the tun still under her arm. She hit the corner of the wall at the top with her elbow. The

impact was enough to leave her fingers tingling, but she didn't drop the bottle.

She'd forgotten about the puddle of piss, but she was feeling well enough now to open her window and pour the night pot's contents into the alley. She swabbed up the rest with a dirty shift, then threw that out the window too. She'd eaten a link of gristly sausage and a heel of black bread the day before. She knew she ought to be hungry, but she wasn't. She pulled off her carter's boots, pulled open the first of the wine bottles, and lay back on her bed, her back against the little headboard.

The wine was sweeter than she was used to, but she could feel the bite of it. Her stomach rebelled for a moment, twisting like a fish on a fire, and she slowed down to sips until it calmed. Her head throbbed once, the beginning of an ache. The wind paused, leaving her in silence. She heard the voices of the two Kurtadam guards rising from below her.

The woman—Enen—laughed. Warmth and calm slid into Cithrin's blood. She took one last, long drink straight from the bottle's neck, turned, and set the wine on the floor. The darkness behind her eyes was comfortable and deep. The roar of the wind kicking back up seemed to come from a great distance, and her mind, such as it was, sparked and slipped. Connections came together in unlikely, unrepeatable ways.

She had the sense that Magister Imaniel had left her something for Captain Wester. She thought that it had to do with the canal traffic in Vanai connecting to the docks in Porte Oliva, and also with herbs and spices packed in snow. Without drawing a line between awake and dozing or dozing and asleep, Cithrin's consciousness faded to darkness. Time stopped, started when she became vaguely aware of angry voices, very far away, and stopped again.

"Get up."

Cithrin forced her eyes open. Captain Wester stood in the doorway, his arms crossed. The light was dim, the city in twilight and cloud.

"Get out of bed," he said. "Do it now."

"Go away," she said.

"I told you to get out of that God damned *bed*!"

Cithrin pushed up on one arm. The room shifted, unsteady.

"And do what?" she said.

"You've missed five meetings," Marcus said. "People are going to start talking, and when they do, you're done. So stand up and do what needs doing."

Cithrin stared at him, her mouth slack with disbelief and a rising anger.

"Nothing needs doing," she said. "It's done. I'm done. I had my

chance, and I lost it."

"I met Qahuar Em. He's not worth pouting over. Now you—"

"Qahuar? Who cares about Qahuar?" Cithrin said, sitting up. She didn't remember spilling wine on her tunic, but it tugged where dried wine had adhered to her skin. "It was the contract. I tried for it, and I lost. I had the world by the hair, and I lost. I failed."

"You failed?"

Cithrin spread her arms, gesturing at the rooms, the city, the world. Pointing out the obvious. Wester stepped closer. In the dim light, his eyes seemed bright as river stones, his mouth as hard as iron.

"Did you watch your wife and daughter burn to death in front of you? *Because* of you?" he asked. When she didn't answer, he nodded. "So it could have been worse. You aren't dead. There's work that needs doing. Get up and do it."

"I'm not permitted. I had a letter from Komme Medean that I'm not allowed to trade in his name."

"So instead you curled up in a mewling ball in his name? I'm sure he'll be thrilled. Get out of bed."

Cithrin lay down, pulling her pillow to her chest. It smelled foul, but she held it anyway.

"I don't take orders from you, *Captain,*" she said, making the last word an insult. "You take money from me, so you do what I tell you. Now go away."

"I won't let you throw away everything you've worked for."

"I *worked* to keep the bank's money safe, and I've done it. So you're right. I win. Now go away."

"You want to keep it."

"Stones want to fly," she said. "They don't have wings."

"Find a way," he said, almost gently.

It was too much. Cithrin shouted wordless rage, sat up, and threw the pillow at him as hard as she could. She didn't want to cry anymore, and here she was, crying.

"I told you to get out!" she screamed. "No one wants you here! I am canceling your contract. Take your wages and your men and lock the door behind you."

Wester took a step back. Cithrin's chest went hollow, and she tried to swallow back the words. He bent down, picked up her pillow between thumb and finger, and lobbed it back to her. It landed on the bed at her side with a soft sound like someone being punched in the stomach. He nudged one of the empty wineskins with the toe of his boot and took a long, deep breath.

"Remember that I tried to talk you back to your senses," he said.

He turned. He walked away.

She had anticipated the pain, braced herself for it, so it wasn't the

anguish of knowing he would leave her that surprised. The surprise was that even knowing, even being ready for it, the despair could still swamp her. It felt like something had died halfway between her throat and her heart, and was curled there inside her body, rotting. She heard him walking down the stairs, each step quieter than the one before. Cithrin snatched up her filthy pillow and screamed into it. It felt like days, just screaming, her body shaking from hunger and exhaustion and the poison of wine, beer, and ale. The muscles in her back and belly were threatening to cramp, but she could no more stop screaming and weeping than she could choose not to breathe.

There were voices below her. Marcus Wester and Yardem Hane. She heard Yardem rumble something that she recognized form its cadence as *Yes, sir* though the syllables before and after it were a confusion. Then a smaller, higher voice. Roach, perhaps.

They'd all go. All of them.

It didn't matter.

Nothing mattered. Her parents were dead so long ago she didn't remember them. Magister Imaniel and Cam and Besel, all dead. The city of her childhood was burned and broken. And the bank, the one thing she had ever made for herself, would be taken from her as soon as the auditor arrived. She couldn't bring herself to think that a few guards leaving early could matter.

But it did.

Slowly, very slowly, the storm within her stilled. It was full dark now, and tiny raindrops tapped against the window like fingernails. She reached for the wine bottle beside the bed and was surprised to find it empty. But there was still the other bottle. And the tun of beer. She would be all right. She only needed to get her strength back. A few more minutes were all she needed.

She hadn't quite roused herself when the footsteps came. First the steady tramp at the base of the stairway, and then, before it even reached the top, heavier thudding. Something hit the wall of the house, and Yardem grunted. There was a wet sound that might have been rain pouring off the roof, but seemed nearer than that. A light glowed. A lantern in Wester's hand. And behind him, Yardem Hane and the two Kurtadam guards struggling with a copper basin easily four feet long.

"We should have brought it first and filled it later," Enen said, her voice straining.

"We'll know next time," Marcus said.

Through her doorway, she saw the three guards put down the basin. It was as tall as Marcus's knee and it sloshed.

"What are you doing?" Cithrin asked, her voice smaller and weaker than she'd expected it to be.

Ignoring her, Yardem handed a round stone jar to the captain and started lighting the candles and lamps in the main room. The two Kurtadam saluted and went back down the stairs. Cithrin sat up, steadying herself with one hand. Marcus walked toward her, and before she could stop him, he grabbed her by the hair and dragged her off the bed. Her knees hit the floor with a thud and a stab of pain.

"What are you *doing*?" she shouted.

"I tried talking first," Wester said, and pushed her into the basin. The water was warm. "Take those rags off or else I will."

"I am not going to—"

In the growing light of the candles, his expression was hard and implacable.

"I've seen girls before. I'm not going to be shocked. I've got soap here," he said, pressing the stone jar into her hand. "And be sure to wash your hair. It's greasy enough to catch fire."

Cithrin looked at the jar. It was heavier than she'd expected, with a tight-fit lid. She didn't know the last time she'd washed herself. When he spoke again, his voice was resigned.

"Either you do it, or I will."

"Don't watch," she said, and as she did, she realized that she was agreeing to a contract whose terms she didn't yet know. All she felt was relief that they hadn't left her.

Marcus made in impatient sound, but turned to face the stairway. Yardem coughed discreetly and stepped into the bedroom. Cithrin pulled off the carter's clothes and knelt in the basin. The air felt cold against her skin. A carved wood bowl floated beside her, and she used it to rinse herself. She hadn't realized how filthy she'd felt until she didn't anymore.

A familiar voice came from the stairway.

"Is she there?" Cary asked.

"She is," Marcus said. "Just toss it up for now."

The actor grunted, and Marcus moved forward, catching a bundle of rope and cloth out of the air.

"We'll be downstairs," Cary said, and Cithrin's street door opened and closed. Marcus untied the rope and passed a length of soft flannel out behind him. Cithrin took the towel from his hand.

"Got a clean dress here too," he said. "You say when you're decent."

Cithrin stepped out of the bath shivering and dried herself quickly. The water in the basin was dark, a scum of suds floating on the top. Shrugging on the dress, she recognized it as one of Cary's. The cloth smelled of face paints and dust.

"I'm decent," she said.

Yardem came out of her bedroom. He'd fashioned her blanket into a sack and filled it with empty wineskins and bottles. The tun and her

remaining bottle were in with the dead. She reached out, ready to tell him to leave those, that she wasn't done with them. The Tralgu cocked an ear, his earring jingling. She let him pass.

"I've got food coming," Marcus said. "You have all the bank's records in here?"

"There's a transaction ledger at the café," she said. "And copies of a few of the contracts."

"I'll send someone. I am posting a guard at the foot of the stairs and under that window. No drink stronger than coffee comes in. You stay in here until you figure out what we're going to do to keep your bank for you."

"There isn't anything," she said. "I've been forbidden from any more negotiation or trade."

"And God knows we wouldn't want to break any rules," Marcus said. "Whatever you need, you say the words. Everyone gets a good self-pitying drunk now and again, but it's over. You stay sober and you do what needs doing. Understood?"

Cithrin stepped in close and kissed him. His lips were still and uncertain, the stubble around them rough. He was the third man she'd ever kissed. Sandr and Qahuar and Captain Wester. He stepped back.

"My daughter wasn't much younger than you."

"Would you have done this to her?" she asked, gesturing at the basin.

"I'd have done anything for her," he said. And then, "I'll have the bath taken away, Magistra. Do you want us to get some coffee since we have to get the books from the café anyway?"

"It will be closed by now. It's night."

"I'll have an exception made."

"Then yes."

He nodded and went back down the stairway. Cithrin sat at her little desk. The sound of rain above her mixed with the voices below. There was nothing to be done, of course. All the best efforts and intentions in the world couldn't change a single number inked in her ledgers. She looked anyway. Yardem and the two Kurtadam came and hauled the basin away again. Roach appeared with a bowl of fish-and-cream soup that tasted of black pepper and the sea. A mug of beer would have gone with it perfectly, but she knew better than to ask. Water was good enough for now.

Her mind felt fragile, a thing that might fall apart at any little jostle, but she tried to imagine herself as the auditor from Carse. What would he see when he looked at all this? She went through the initial listing of inventory that she'd made. Silk, tobacco, gems, jewels, spices, silver, and gold. The pudgy Antean at the mill pond had stolen some, and her estimate of the loss was included, the numbers in black

strokes against the cream-colored paper. So there was the beginning. Now to what she'd done with it.

Turning the pages had a sense of nostalgia. The dry hiss of the paper, and here was another artifact of the golden age that had just passed. The contract and receipt from when she'd bought the rooms from the gambler. The onionskin permit and seal that had marked the opening of the bank. She traced her fingertips over it. It hadn't been a full season since she'd begun. It seemed more than that. It seemed a lifetime. Then the agreements of consignment from the spicer and the cloth merchants. Her valuation, theirs, and the final income from sale. The jewelry had always been the problem. She found herself wondering if there might have been a better way to be rid of it than the one she'd chosen. Maybe if she'd waited until the ships from Narinisle had come in. Or placed them on consignment with a trading house with a heavy export trade. Then she wouldn't have been flooding her own market. Well, next time.

Distant thunder rolled softly through the steady tapping of rain. Roach, soaked to his scales, brought up the lockbox from the café, a huge earthenware mug of coffee, and a note from Maestro Asanpur hoping that she would feel better soon and saying that the café felt too large without her in it. It was almost enough to reduce her to tears again, but that would have confused the Timzinae boy, so she forced herself to keep composure.

The best trade she'd worked had been the horizontal semi-monopoly with the brewer, cooper, and taphouses. Each person in the chain of production was in business with the bank, and so as soon as the grain and water arrived at the brewery, every trade benefited her, and put her in the position to guarantee business to the next link. If she could make arrangements with a few farmers for dedicated access to their grain crops, it would be a locked-in gold-producing mechanism.

But that would be for the next person, whoever they were. Cithrin sipped at her coffee. It had been a good thought, though, and well performed. In a year, when the remnants of her parents' investment in the bank came to her, she would have to see if there was some much smaller version of the same plan. It would be painful, she thought, going from Magistra Cithrin bel Sarcour to the bank's ward again for that last year. But once she reached her naming day, and could enter into business for herself…

The skin on her arm puckered, the fine hairs standing up. Her neck prickled. A feeling of cold fire lit her spine. She closed the books she'd written, shoved them aside, and went back to the older ones, written by other hands now dead. The records of Vanai. The small red-inked notation that marked her arrival at the bank. She closed the book with trembling hands.

Captain Wester had been right.
There was a way.

Dawson

I won't hear it," King Simeon said. The months hadn't been kind to him. His skin was greyer than it had been, his lips an unhealthy blue. Sweat beaded his brow though the room wasn't particularly warm. "God, Dawson. Listen to yourself. You're back from exile for one day —*one*—and already you're back at it."

"If Clara's right and Maas is plotting against Aster's life—"

Simeon slapped his palm to the table. The meeting chamber echoed with it, and the silence that followed was broken only by the songs of finches and the babbling of the fountain outside the windows. The guards around the back wall remained impassive as always, their armor the black and gold of the city, their swords sheathed at their hips. Dawson wondered what they would have said, had they been asked. Someone must be able to talk sense to Simeon, though it clearly wasn't him.

"If I'd listened to your advice," the king said, "Issandrian would be leading a popular revolt against me right now. Instead, he was here yesterday, bending his knee, asking my forgiveness and swearing on his life that the mercenary riot wasn't his plan or doing."

"If it wasn't his, it was someone's," Dawson said.

"I am your king, Baron Osterling. I am perfectly capable of guiding this kingdom safely."

"Simeon, you are my friend," Dawson said softly. "I know how you sound when you're frightened to your bones. Can you put it off until next year?"

"Put what off?"

"Fostering your son. Naming his protector. The closing of the court is three weeks from now. Only say that the events of the season have distracted you from the decision. Take time."

Simeon rose. He walked like an old man. Outside the window the leaves were still green, but less so than they had been. The summer was dying, and someday very soon the green would fade, red and gold taking the field. Beautiful colors, but still death.

"Maas has no reason to wish Aster ill," Simeon said.

"He's in contact with Asterilhold. He's working with them—"

"You worked with Maccia to reinforce Vanai. Lord Daskellin danced with Northcoast. Lord Tremontair is keeping assignations with the ambassador from Borja, and Lord Arminnin spent more time in Hallskar than Antea last year. Shall I slaughter every nobleman with

connections outside the kingdom? You wouldn't live." Simeon's breath was fast and shallow. He leaned against the windowsill, steadying himself. "My father died when he was a year younger than I am now."

"I remember."

"Maas has allies. Everyone who loved Issandrian and Klin turned to him when they left."

"Mine turned to Daskellin."

"You don't have allies, Dawson. You have enemies and admirers. You couldn't even keep Palliako's boy near you when he was the hero of the day. Lerer sent him off to the edge of the world rather than let him take another revel from you. Enemies and admirers."

"Which are you, Majesty?"

"Both. Have been since you flirted that Cinnae girl away from me at the tourney when we were twelve."

Dawson chuckled. The king's smile was almost abashed, and then he was laughing too. Simeon came back and collapsed into his chair.

"I know you don't approve," he said. "But trust me that I'm doing the best I can. There are just so many things to balance, and I'm so tired. I am unbearably tired."

"At least don't give Aster to Maas. I don't care if he is the most influential man at court just now. Find someone else."

"Thank you for your advice, old friend."

"Simeon—"

"No. Thank you. That's all."

In the antechamber, the servants gave Dawson back his sword and dagger. It seemed years since Simeon had insisted on the old formality of coming to private audience unarmed. This was how far they had all fallen. Dawson was still adjusting the buckle when he stepped outside. The air was warm, the sun heavy in the sky, but the breeze had an edge to it. The soft, pressing air of summer was gone. The seasons were changing again. Dawson turned away the footman's assisting hand and climbed into his carriage.

"My lord?" the driver asked.

"The Great Bear," Dawson said.

The whip cracked, and the carriage lurched off, leaving the blocky towers and martial gates of the Kingspire behind. He let himself lean back into the seat, the jolts and knocks sending jabs of pain up his spine. First the journey back from Osterling Fells and then the better half of the day waiting for his majesty to clear an audience for him had worn him down more than it once would have.

When he'd been a young man, he'd ridden from Osterling Fells to Camnipol, stopping only to trade horses, arrived just before the queen's ball, and spent the whole evening until the dawn dancing. Mostly with Clara. It seemed like a story he'd heard told of someone

else, except that he could still see the dress she'd worn and smell the perfume at the nape of her neck. He turned the memory aside before his wife's younger incarnation aroused him. He wanted to walk upright when he reached the club, and while he was old, he wasn't dead.

The Fraternity of the Great Bear rose up, its façade the black stone and gold leaf of the Undying City. Coaches and carriages were thick in the street, drivers pushing to position themselves where their particular masters would walk the fewest steps from carriage to door. The air stank of the fresh horse droppings being ground to paste under a hundred hooves. Dawson toyed with the idea of getting out here and walking in just to escape, but it was beneath his station, so he made do with abusing the driver for his slowness and incompetence. By the time the footmen of the club hurried out with a step for him, he almost felt better.

Within, the club was a fabric woven from pipe smoke, heat, and music ignored in favor of conversation. Dawson gave his jacket to a servant girl who bowed and scurried away. When he entered the great hall, half a dozen men turned toward him, applauding his return with varying degrees of pleasure and sarcasm. Enemies and admirers. Dawson cut a bow that could be read as acknowledgment or insult depending on who it was given to, scooped up a cut crystal glass of fortified wine, and stalked to the smaller halls on the left.

A wide, round table sat in the center of one hall, a dozen men around it, many of them talking at once. In among the press of bodies and wit, Issandrian's long hair and Sir Klin's artless face. Issandrian caught sight of him and stood. He nodded to Dawson rather than bow. It might only have been a trick of the light, but the man seemed lessened. As if his exile had actually humbled him. The others at his table began to grow quiet, becoming aware that something was happening around them even if they were too dim to know what. Dawson drew his dagger in a duelist's salute, and Issandrian smiled in what might have been approval.

At the back of the hall were private meeting rooms, and the least of these was hardly larger than a carriage itself. The dark leather couches ate what little light the candles gave. Daskellin sat in a corner where he could see whoever entered. His back was to the wall, and his sword was undrawn, but near his hand.

"Well," Dawson said, lowering himself to the couch opposite, "I see you've squandered everything we had in my absence."

"Pleasure to see you too," Canl Daskellin said.

"How do we go from successfully defending Camnipol from foreign blades to riding behind Feldin Maas? Can you answer that?"

"Do you want the long answer or the short?"

“Will the long be less annoying?”

Daskellin leaned forward.

“Maas has backing, and we don’t. I had it. Or I thought I did. Then a balance sheet changed or some such, and Clark lit out for Birancour.”

“It’s what you deserve for working with bankers.”

“It won’t happen again,” Daskellin said darkly.

It was as close to an apology as Dawson expected to get. He let the matter slide. Instead, he drained his glass, leaned to the door, and rapped against it until a serving girl appeared to refresh his glass.

“Where do we stand, then?” Dawson asked when she’d gone.

Daskellin shook his head, breath hissing out through his teeth.

“If it comes to the field, we can hold our own. There are enough landholders who still hate Asterilhold that it’s easy enough to rally them.”

“If Aster dies before he takes the throne?”

“Then we fervently pray his majesty’s royal scepter’s still in working order, because a new male heir is the best hope we have. I’ve had my genealogist look through the blood archives, and Simeon has a cousin in Asterilhold with a legitimate claim.”

“Legitimate?” Dawson asked, leaning forward.

“I’m afraid so, and you can’t guess this. He’s a supporter of the principle of a farmer’s council. We lose the quarter of our support with more sense that guts. The others rally around Oyer Verennin or possibly Umansin Tor, both of whom can also make a claim. Asterilhold backs its man with the help of the group Maas and Issandrian have gathered, we fight a civil war, and we lose.”

Daskellin clapped his hands once. The candle above him sputtered. In the halls of the club, a serving girl shouted and a man laughed. Dawson’s fortified wine tasted more bitter than it had when he started it, and he put the glass down.

“Could this have been the scheme all along?” Dawson asked. “Was Maas using Issandrian and Klin and all that hairwash about a farmer’s council just for this? We may have been aiming at the wrong target all this time.”

“Possibly,” Daskellin said. “Or it might have been a chance he saw and decided to take. We’d have to ask Feldin, and I suspect he might not tell us the truth.”

Dawson tapped the lip of his glass with a finger, the crystal chiming softly.

“We can’t let Aster die,” Dawson said.

“Everything dies. Men, cities, empires. Everything,” Daskellin said. “The timing’s the question.”

Dawson took his dinner with the family in the informal dining hall. Roast pork with apple, honeyed squash, and fresh bread with whole cloves of garlic baked into it. A cream linen cloth on the table. Ceramic dishes from Far Syramys and polished silver utensils. It could as well have been ashes served on scrap iron.

"Geder Palliako's come back," Jorey said.

"Really?" Clara said. "I don't remember where he'd gone. Not to the south, certainly, with so many people having friends and family in Vanai. You can't expect a decent reception when you've killed a person's cousin or some such. Wouldn't be realistic. Was he in Hallskar?"

"The Keshet," Jorey said around a mouthful of apple. "Came back with a pet cunning man."

"That's nice for him," Clara said. She rang for the serving girl, and then, frowning, "We don't need to throw another revel for him, do we?"

"No," Dawson said.

He knew, of course, what they were doing. Jorey bringing up odd, trivial subjects. Clara burbling on about them and turning everything into a question for him to answer. It was the strategy they always used in dark times to lift him up out of himself. Tonight, the burden was too heavy.

He'd considered killing Maas. It would be difficult, of course. A direct assault was impossible. In the first place, it was expected and so would be guarded against. In the second, failure meant an even greater sympathy for Maas in the court. The idea of challenging him to a duel and then allowing things to go wrong appealed to him. He and Maas had been on the dueling grounds often enough that it wouldn't be an obvious convenience, and men slipped all the time. Blades went deeper than intended. He had to ignore the fact that Feldin was younger, stronger, and had lost their last duel only because Dawson was cleverer. The idea was still sweet.

"Fact is," Barriath said as the serving girl came in, "this boat is sinking, and we're bailing it out with a sieve."

"Meaning what?" Jorey said.

"Simeon's my king and I'll put my life down at his word, the same as anyone," Barriath said, "but he's barely his own master anymore. Father stopped the Edford Charter madness, and now we're looking at plots from Asterilhold. If we stop that, there will be another crisis after it, and another after that one."

"I don't think that's appropriate talk for the dinner table, dear," Clara said, accepting a fresh glass of watered wine from the servant.

"Ah, let him talk," Dawson said. "It's what we're all thinking about anyway."

“At least wait until the help is gone,” Clara said. “Or who knows what they’ll think of us in the small quarters.”

The servant girl left blushing. Clara watched the door close after her, then nodded to her eldest son.

“Antea needs a king,” Barriath said. “Instead it’s got a kindly uncle. I hate to be the one to bring the bad news, but it’s all through the navy. If it weren’t for Lord Skestinin encouraging the captains to lay on the lash and drop troublemakers for the fish, we’d have had a mutiny by now. At least one.”

“I can’t believe that,” Clara said. “Mutiny’s such a rude, shortsighted thing. I’m certain that our men in the king’s navy wouldn’t stoop so low.”

Barriath laughed.

“Mother, if you want truly inappropriate dinner conversation, I can tell you something about how low sailing men stoop.”

“But Simeon is the king and Aster’s still a boy,” Jorey said. It was, Dawson thought, a brave attempt to keep the subject from veering again. “You can’t expect them to be different people than they are.”

“I agree with you, my boy,” Dawson said. “I wish I didn’t.”

“Best thing,” Barriath said, “would be for Simeon to find a protector with a spine to watch over Aster, and then abdicate. A regency could last eight or ten years, and by the time Aster took the crown, the kingdom would be in order.”

Jorey snorted his derision, and Barriath’s face went hard.

“Spare me,” Jorey said. “A regent who could solve all the kingdom’s conflicts in a decade wouldn’t be likely to give up his regency. He’d be king.”

“You’re right,” Barriath said. “And that would be just terrible, would it?”

“That’s starting to sound awfully like the people we’re working against, brother.”

“If you two are going to start fighting, you can leave the table now,” Clara said. Barriath and Jorey looked at their plates, muttering variations on *I’m sorry, Mother.* Clara nodded to herself. “That’s better. Besides, it’s a waste of effort to argue about the problems you don’t have at the expense of the ones you do. We simply have to convince Simeon that poor Feldin really has gotten himself in too deep with those terrible Asterilhold people.”

“It isn’t as easy as that,” Dawson said.

“Certainly it is,” Clara said. “He’s certain to have letters, isn’t he? That’s what Phelia said. That he was always off at his meetings and letters.”

“I don’t think he’ll be writing to his foreign friends with detailed accounts of treason, Mother,” Barriath said. *“Dear Lord Such-and-so,*

glad to hear you'll help me slaughter the prince."

"He wouldn't have to say it, though. Not outright," Jorey said. "If there was evidence he was corresponding with this cousin who'd lay claim to the throne, it might be enough."

"You can always judge people by who they write to," Clara said with satisfaction. "There's the inconvenience of actually getting the letters, of course, but Phelia was so desperately pleased to see me last time, I can't think it will be particularly difficult to arrange another invitation. Not that one can rely on that, of course, which is why I've sponsored that needlework master to come show us his stitching patterns. Embroidery seems simple just to look at, but the more complex work can be quite boggling. Which reminds me, Dawson dear, I'm going to require the back hall with the good light tomorrow. There will be about five of us, because after all it seemed a bit obvious to only bring Phelia. That won't be a problem, will it?"

"What?" Dawson said.

"The back hall with the good light," Clara said, turning her head to him and raising her eyebrows without actually looking up from cutting her meat. "Because really needlework can't be done in gloom. It—"

"You're cultivating Phelia Maas?"

"She lives with Feldin," Clara said. "And with the close of court coming so soon, waiting seems unwise, don't you think?"

There was a glitter in her eye and a dangerous angle at the corner of her mouth. Dawson found himself quite certain that his wife was enjoying herself. He found his mind dashing to keep up with hers. If Phelia could be convinced to allow access to the house for a few men…

"What are you doing, Mother?" Barriath asked.

"Saving the kingdom, dear," she said. "Eat your squash. Don't just move it around on the plate and pretend you've done anything. That never worked when you were a boy, I can't imagine why you still try it."

"He won't believe us," Dawson said. "After all the objections I've raised, Maas will claim forgery. But it might be enough to sway Simeon from giving Aster over."

"More swaying from the king?" Barriath said. "Is that really what we need? Move him to decisive action, or stay back."

"Someone else could take them," Jorey said. "Someone who isn't particularly allied with us or Maas."

"What about the Palliako boy?" Clara said. "I know he seems a bit frivolous, but he and Jorey are on good terms and it isn't as though he were part of your inner circle."

Dawson ate a bite of pork, chewing slowly to give himself time to

think. In truth, the meat wasn't bad. Salt and sweet and something like pepper heat under it all. Quite good, in fact. He felt the smile spreading across his lips, becoming aware that it had been some time since he'd smiled.

"I don't know about that," Jorey said, but Dawson waved the words away.

"Palliako was useful ending the Vanai campaign. And he was here to stop the mercenary riot. He's been an apt tool before," Dawson said. "I can't think why this time would be different."

Geder

The banner spread out over the table, vermillion cloth flowing down to puddle on the floor. The dark eightfold sigil in the pale center had bent onto itself, so Geder leaned in and plucked it straight. Lerer stroked his chin, walking first close and then back and close again before stopping at his son's shoulder.

"Among my people, this is the standard of your race," Basrahip said. "The color is for the blood from which all races of mankind came."

"And the compass rose in the middle there?" Lerer asked.

"That is the symbol of the goddess," Basrahip said.

Lerer grunted. He walked forward again, touching the cloth with careful fingertips. Geder felt his own fingers twitch toward it, mirroring his father. Basrahip had told him how the priests harvested spider silk and learned to dye it. The banner represented the work of ten lifetimes, and running his hands over it had been like touching the wind.

"And you wanted to hang this at… ah… Rivenhalm?"

"No," Geder said. "No, I was thinking it would be at the temple here in Camnipol."

"Oh. That's right," Lerer said. "The temple."

The road home from the hidden temple of the Sinir mountains had been a thousand times more pleasant than the journey out. At the end of each day, Basrahip would sit at the fire with him, listening to whatever anecdotes and tales Geder could remember, laughing at the funny ones, becoming pensive at the tragic. Even the servants, initially unable to hide their discomfort at the high priest's company, calmed well before they reached the border between the Keshet and Sarakal. Somewhat to Geder's surprise, Basrahip knew the rough track of their journey. The priest had explained that though the human world had remade itself, collapsed, and begun again countless times since the temple of the spider goddess had withdrawn from the world, the dragon's roads hadn't changed. He might not know where one country bordered another or even the path of a river as those things changed over time. The roads were eternal.

When they'd stopped in Inentai to rest the horses and reequip themselves, Basrahip had wandered the streets like a child, his mouth open in astonishment at every new building. It occurred to Geder at the time that in some fashion, he and the priest were not so dissimilar. Basrahip had lived a life with tales of the world, but never the world

itself. Geder's life had been much the same, only his personal, private temple had been built with books and carved out from his duties and obligations. And still, in comparison, Geder was a man of the world. He had seen Kurtadam and Timzinae, Cinnae and Tralgu. Basrahip had known only Firstblood, and in fact only those who looked like himself and the villagers nearest the temple. Seeing a Firstblood with dark skin or pale hair was as much a revelation to the priest as a new race.

Watching him move first tentatively and then with greater and greater sureness through the streets and roads, Geder had some vague understanding of what his own father had meant by the joy of watching a child discover the world. Geder had found himself noticing the things he'd overlooked and taken for granted only because they astounded his new friend and ally. When, at the trailing edge of summer, they reached Camnipol again, Geder was almost sorry to see the journey's end.

Add to which, his father seemed oddly uncomfortable with his discoveries.

"I don't suppose you've picked a site for this new temple? Lost goddess and all."

"I was thinking someplace close to the Kingspire," Geder said. "There's the old weavers' guild hall. It's been empty for years. I'm sure they'd like someone to take it off their hands."

Lerer grunted noncommittally. Basrahip began to refold the temple banner. Lerer nodded to the priest, put a hand on Geder's elbow, and steered him gently out to the corridor, walking casually. Geder hardly noticed that his father was separating him from Basrahip. The dark stone ate the daylight, and the servants found themselves suddenly needed elsewhere.

"That essay," his father said. "You're still working on it?"

"No, not really. It's outgrown itself. It was supposed to be about finding a likely area to be associated with Morade and the fall of the Dragon Empire. Now I've got the goddess and the history of the temple and everything. I've barely started making sense of it all. No point writing any more until I know what I'm writing about, eh? What about you? Is there any fresh news?"

"I was looking forward to that essay," Lerer said, half to himself. When he looked up, he forced a smile. "I'm sure there's fresh news every day, but so far I've been able to keep from hearing any of it. These bastards and their court games. I could live until the dragons come back and I still wouldn't forgive what they did to you in Vanai."

The word tightened Geder's stomach. The lines at the corners of Lerer's mouth were sorrow and anger etched in skin. Geder had the surreal urge to reach out his thumb and rub them smooth again.

“Nothing bad happened in Vanai,” Geder said. “I mean, yes, it burned. That wasn’t good. But it wasn’t as bad as it’s made out. It’s all right, I mean. In the end.”

Lerer’s gaze shifted from one of Geder’s eyes to the other, looking into him. Geder swallowed. He couldn’t think why his heart would be beating faster.

“In the end. As you say,” Lerer said. He clapped his hand on Geder’s shoulder. “It’s good you’re back.”

“I’m glad to be here,” Geder said, too quickly.

With a quiet cough to announce himself, the house steward stepped into the corridor.

“Forgive me, my lords, but Jorey Kalliam has arrived asking after Sir Geder.”

“Oh!” Geder said. “He hasn’t seen Basrahip yet. Where is he? You didn’t leave him in the courtyard, did you?”

Lerer’s hand dropped from Geder’s shoulder. Geder had the sense that he’d somehow said the wrong thing.

“His lordship is in the front room,” the steward said.

Jorey rose from the chair by the window as he came in. The season in the city had put some flesh back into the man’s face. Geder smiled, and the two of them stood looking at each other. Geder read his own uncertainty—should they clasp hands? embrace? make formal greeting?—in Jorey’s expression. When Geder laughed, Jorey, smiling sheepishly, did too.

“I see you’re back from the wild places,” Jorey said. “The travel agrees with you.”

“Does it? I think I just about wept when I could sleep in a real bed again. Going on campaign may be a string of discomfort and indignity, but at least I never worried about being killed by bandits.”

“There are worse things than a good, honest bandit. You were missed here,” Jorey said. “You heard what happened?”

“Exile all around,” Geder said, trying to affect a jaded tone. “I don’t know that I could have helped. I barely had any part except when we held the gate from closing.”

“That was the best part to have in the whole mess,” Jorey said.

“Probably so.”

“Well.”

The silence was awkward. Jorey sat again, and Geder walked forward. The front room, like all of the Palliako rooms in Camnipol, was small. The chairs were worked leather that time had stiffened and cracked, and the smell of dust never left the place. The sounds of hooves against stone and drivers berating one another came from the street. Jorey bit his lip.

“I’m here to ask a favor,” he said, and it sounded like a confession.

“We took Vanai together. We burned it together. We saved Camnipol,” Geder said. “You don’t have to ask favors of me. Just tell me what you need me to do.”

“That’s intended to make this easier, isn’t it? All right. My father believes he’s discovered a plot against Prince Aster.”

Geder crossed his arms.

“Does the king know?”

“The king is choosing not to know. And that’s where you come in. I think we can get evidence. Letters. But I’m afraid that if I take them to King Simeon, he’ll think they’re forged. I need someone else. Someone he trusts, or at least doesn’t distrust.”

“Of course,” Geder said. “Absolutely. Who is the traitor?”

“Baron of Ebbinbaugh,” Jorey said. “Feldin Maas.”

“Alan Klin’s ally?”

“And Curtin Issandrian’s, for that, yes. Maas’s wife is my mother’s cousin, which God knows doesn’t sound like much of a toehold, but it’s what we have to work with. She—the wife, I mean. Not my mother. She seems to know more than she’s saying. There’s no question she’s frightened. My mother has her at a needlework master’s knee as we speak in hopes of winning her confidence.”

“But she hasn’t confessed anything? Told you for certain what’s going on?”

“No, we’re still well in the realm of suspicions and fears. There’s no proof. But—”

Geder put up his hand, palm out.

“I have someone you should meet,” he said.

The last time Geder had been to the Kalliam mansion, it had been dressed for a revel in his honor. Without the flowers and streamers and crepe, the austerity and grandeur of the architecture came through. The servants in their livery had the rigid stance of a private guard. The glass in the windows sported no dust. The women’s voices that came from the back hall sounded genteel and proper, even without any individual word being audible. Basrahip sat on a stool in the corner. His broad shoulders and vaguely amused expression made him seem like a child revisiting a playhouse he’d outgrown. The austere cut and rough, colorless cloth of his robes marked him as not belonging to the court.

Jorey was sitting at a writing desk, fidgeting with pen and ink without actually writing anything. Geder paced behind a long damask-upholstered couch and wished he liked pipes. The occasion seemed to call for the gravity of smoke.

The choir of feminine voices grew louder, and the hard tapping of

formal shoes came from the doorway, louder and then softer as they passed. They hadn't come in. Geder moved toward the door, but Jorey waved him back.

"Mother will be seeing the others out," he said. "She'll be back in a moment."

Geder nodded, and true to Jorey's word, the footsteps returned, the voices reduced to a duet. When the women stepped into the room, Jorey rose to his feet. Basrahip followed suit a moment later. Geder had danced with the Baroness of Osterling Fells at his revel, but between the months and the whirl of drink and confusion that time had been, he wouldn't have recognized her. He could see how her own features had influenced Jorey's, especially around the eyes. Surprise touched her expression and vanished again, less than the flutter of a moth's wing. Behind her, a sickly-looking woman with a pinched face and dark eyes had to be Phelia Maas.

"Oh, excuse me," Clara Kalliam said. "I didn't mean to intrude, dear."

"Not at all, Mother. We were hoping you'd join us. You remember Geder Palliako?"

"How could I forget the man who held the eastern gate? I haven't seen you at court this season, sir, but I understand you've been traveling. An expedition of some sort? Let me introduce my cousin Phelia."

The dark-eyed woman came into the room and held her hand out to Geder. Her smile spoke of relief, as if she'd been dreading something that she thought she'd now avoided. Geder made his bow and saw Lady Kalliam's eyebrows rise as she noticed the priest in the corner.

"Ladies," Jorey said. "This is Basrahip. He's a holy man Geder brought back from the Keshet."

"Really?" Lady Kalliam said. "I hadn't known you were collecting priests."

"It came as a surprise to me too," Geder said. "But please, won't you ladies sit?"

According to his plan, Geder sat Phelia Maas on the couch with her back toward Basrahip and then took his own place across from her. Jorey resumed his place at the writing desk, and his mother took a chair near that happily didn't block Geder's view of the priest.

"Maas," Geder said, as if recalling something. In truth, he'd planned precisely what to say. "I had an Alberith Maas serving under me in Vanai. A relation of yours?"

"Nephew," Phelia said. "My husband's nephew. Alberith has mentioned you often since his return."

"You're the Baroness of Ebbinbaugh, then?" Geder asked. "Sir Klin was my commander in the Vanai campaign. He and your husband are

friends, yes?"

"Oh yes," Phelia said with a smile. "Sir Klin is a dear, close friend of Feldin's."

Behind her, Basrahip gazed into the middle distance, his face impassive as if listening intently to something only he could hear. He shook his head once. *No.*

"There was a falling-out, though, wasn't there? I'm sure I heard something like that," Geder said, pretending a casual knowledge he didn't have. The woman's face went still, except for her eyes, which clicked from Geder to Lady Kalliam and back. There was fear in the way she held her hands and the corners of her mouth. Geder felt a slow, pleasant warmth growing in his chest. It was going to work. At his side, Jorey's mother considered him with interest.

"I'm sure you misunderstood," Phelia said. "Alan and Feldin are on excellent terms."

No.

"I always liked Sir Klin," Geder said for the simple pleasure of being able to lie to a woman who couldn't lie to him. "I felt terrible when I heard he'd been blamed for the riot. Your husband didn't suffer for that, I hope."

"No, no, thank you. We were very fortunate."

Yes.

"Sir Palliako," Lady Kalliam said, "to what do we owe the pleasure of your company today?"

Geder looked at Jorey, then at Lady Kalliam. He'd meant to ask a few innocuous questions, get what insight he could, uncover what could be uncovered. He'd meant to move slowly. The way the woman held herself tighter and tighter, the fragility of her smile, and the scent of fear that came from her like the sweet from roses argued against. He couldn't scare her so badly she left, but he could scare her badly. He smiled at Lady Kalliam.

"Well, the truth is I was hoping for an introduction to Baroness Ebbinbaugh here. I had some questions for her. I haven't spent all the season traveling," he said pleasantly. "I've been looking into the riot. Its roots. And its aftermath."

The color had gone from Phelia Maas's face. Her breath was fast and shallow, like a hand-caught sparrow about to die from fright.

"I can't imagine what there is to look into," she said, her voice thready and faint.

Geder found it was easier to smile kindly when he didn't mean it. Outside, a wind chime was singing to itself in random, idiot percussion. Jorey and his mother had both gone perfectly still. Geder laced his fingers over his knee.

"I know everything, Lady Maas," he said. "The prince. The riot. The

Vanai campaign. The woman."

"What woman?" she breathed.

He didn't have the first idea what woman, but no doubt there was some woman involved somewhere. It didn't matter.

"Say anything," he said. "Pick any detail. Even things you don't imagine anyone else could know, and I'll tell you if they're true."

"Feldin isn't involved in any of it," she said. Geder didn't even need to look at Basrahip.

"That isn't true, Lady Maas. I know you're frightened, but I'm here to help you and your family. I can do that. But I need to know I can trust you. You see? Tell me the truth. It doesn't matter, because it's all things I know already. Tell me how it started. Just that."

"It was the ambassador from Asterilhold," she said. "He came to Feldin a year ago."

No.

"You're lying to me, Baroness," Geder said, very gently. "Try again."

Phelia Maas shuddered. She seemed like a thing made of spun sugar, almost too delicate to support her own weight. She opened her mouth, closed it, swallowed.

"There was a man. He was going to be part of the farmer's council."

Yes.

"Yes. I know who you mean. Can you tell me his name?"

"Ucter Anninbaugh."

No.

"That wasn't his name. Can you tell me his name?"

"Ellis Newport."

No.

"I can help you, Baroness. I may be the only man in Camnipol who can. Tell me his name."

Her dead eyes met his.

"Torsen. Torsen Aestilmont."

Yes.

"There," Geder said. "That wasn't so hard, was it? Do you understand now that you and your husband have no secrets from me?"

The woman nodded once. Her chin began to spasm, her cheeks flushed, and a heartbeat later she was bawling like a child. Jorey's mother swooped to her side, putting an arm around her. Geder sat, watching. His heart was beating quickly, but his limbs were loose and relaxed. When he had denied Alan Klin the secret wealth of Vanai, he'd felt excited. Gleeful. When he'd come to the decision to burn Vanai, he'd felt righteous anger. Maybe even satisfaction. But he wasn't sure that ever in his life before now—before this moment—he'd felt sated.

He rose and walked over to Jorey. The man's eyes were wide. Impressed almost past the point of believing. Geder spread his hands. *You see?*

"How did you do that?" Jorey whispered. "How did you know?" There was awe in his voice.

Basrahip was fewer than three paces away. The bull-huge head was still bowed. The thick fingers bent around each other, hand clasping hand. Phelia Maas's sobs were like a storm on the sea, and the murmured lullaby of promises and comfort from Lady Kalliam had barely thrown any oil on that water. Geder went to leaned so close his lips brushed the huge man's ear.

"I will build all the temples you want, forever."

Basrahip smiled.

Clara

On one hand, they had seriously misunderstood who and what Geder Palliako was. But on the other, he appeared to be on their side. For the time being, at least.

Still, Clara's heart ached for Phelia.

The bedroom was darkened, heavy curtains pushing the daylight away. Phelia lay on her back, the salt tracks of dried tears marking the corners of her eyes. Clara sat beside her, stroking her shoulders and arms the way physicians did when someone had taken a blow to the head or received shocking news. When Phelia spoke, the hysteria was gone. There was no more room for pretending that things could end well, and Clara could hear in the woman's voice that losing that hope had been a relief.

"Will he really keep Feldin safe?" Phelia asked. "If I give him the letters, will Palliako really see that Simeon doesn't kill him?"

"That's certainly what he said," Clara said.

"Do you trust him?"

"I barely know him, dear."

They lapsed again into silence.

"If the king already knows anyway," Phelia said. "If he only wants to see who in the court of Asterilhold was involved… I mean, with all that Palliako already knew, Aster was never in any real danger. Not really."

"That's one way to see it."

For the better part of an hour, Geder Palliako had coaxed Phelia into admitting everything. Feldin's complicity in the mercenary riot, his connections in Asterilhold, his alliances within the groups fighting for a farmer's council. Any one would stand as treason. Together, Clara didn't see room for mercy. Which wasn't what Phelia needed to hear now.

"How did it all get so out of hand?" Phelia asked the darkness. She sighed. It was a small, hard sound. "Tell him I will. I'll take him to Feldin's private study. I have a key, but there will be a guard. And he has to swear that it will only be exile."

"All right."

Phelia took Clara's hand, holding it like it was the only thing that kept her from falling down a cliff.

"You won't make me go alone, will you? You'll come with me?"

There was nothing Clara wanted less. Phelia's eyes glittered in the

twilight of the room.

"Of course, dear," she said. "Of course I'll come."

In the smoking room, Clara found the men waiting with such anxiety she imagined herself as a midwife come to deliver news of a birth. Dawson stopped his pacing as she walked in. Geder and Jorey looked up from a game of cards they were only half playing. Only the quiet priest seemed unconcerned, but then she supposed unnatural serenity was part of his work. Even Vincen Coe was there, brooding in the shadows the way he so often did. The air was close and hot, like every sip had already been breathed once before.

"She's agreed to take Lord Palliako to the letters," Clara said, "but only if he swears Simeon won't have Feldin executed and if I'm with her when they go."

"Absolutely not," Dawson said.

"She will lose her nerve, husband," Clara said. "You know what she's like. I'll take Vincen with me, and we'll be fine. The four of us—"

"Five," Geder said, "with Basrahip."

"I'm going too," Jorey said.

"Of course you aren't, dear," Clara said. "Feldin only allows me because I'm a woman and he finds me feckless and charming. Vincen's a servant. Lord Palliako and…"

"Basrahip," the priest said.

"Yes, that. Phelia was here for the needlework and had an example she wanted to show me, so I went home with her. Along the way, we bumped into Lord Palliako and his friend and Phelia invited them along so we could hear stories of his summer travels. Perfectly innocent."

"I don't see why I couldn't be part of that," Jorey said. "Or Barriath."

"Because you are your father's sons, and I am only his wife. You have a great deal to learn about the place of women. Now, I suggest we do this before Phelia has a change of heart, poor thing."

Walking out to the carriage, Clara felt proud of Phelia. The way she held herself. The polite nod she gave to Dawson as they pulled away. The autumn sun was already near the horizon, the flame seeming to dance on the rooftops as the driver threaded his way through the streets. The city seemed clearer than usual, the sounds of wheels and voices sharper and more real than she was used to. The buildings they passed had rich textures in the stone of the walls. They passed a young Tralgu pushing a cart piled high with grapes, and Clara felt she could have counted each individual fruit. She felt as if she'd woken up twice without going to sleep in the middle. She wondered if it was how soldiers felt on the morning of a battle. It seemed likely.

Geder Palliako smiled at everything. She still thought of him as the

pale, pudgy boy who'd ridden off to war in her son's company. In truth, his travels had left him leaner and darkened by the sun. And more than that, his eyes had changed. Even when he'd returned from the city he'd killed, there had been a shyness to him. It wasn't there any longer, and she thought he looked less handsome for the loss. She found herself wondering what he had really been doing all those weeks he pretended to have been in the Keshet. When his priest caught her staring, he smiled. She turned away.

The private courtyard wasn't half dead any longer. As many lanterns and candles were glowing in the windows of Curtin Issandrian's mansion as in Feldin Maas's. The carriage jolted to a stop and a footman ran out with a step for them. Phelia first, and then herself. Geder Palliako, the only man of blood. Vincen Coe and the priest paused, unsure for a moment, and then the priest smiled and waved the huntsman on.

The door slave was a different man, Firstblood this time, but so thick with muscle he might have been the priest's twin. Vincen and Geder turned over their swords and daggers. The priest had no weapons.

"The baron wanted to see you when you came," the door slave said. "He's in the rear hall."

No honorifics, no *my lady*. He might have been speaking to anyone for all the respect in his tone. Clara wondered what sort of men Maas had been taking into service, and then instantly answered her own question. Mercenaries. Fighters. Sword-and-bows. The sort of men who kill for pay. And she was going into the enemy camp. Stepping over the threshold, she faltered. Phelia looked at her, alarmed. Clara shook her head and bulled on. She refused to accept support and comfort from someone in her cousin's position. It would be rude.

In silence, Phelia led them down the wide corridor toward the room where she'd received Clara the last time she'd been. Fresh-cut flowers and garlands of autumn vine left the air smelling rich. The candlelight softened the corners and warmed the colors of the tapestries and the carpeted runner. Geder coughed. A nervous little sound.

At the base of the stair, Phelia turned right, and they all followed her. A short hallway that jogged at the end. Fewer candles were lit here. The shadows thickened and pressed in against them. At the far end of the hall, a thin servant's staircase rose up and a wider set of doors stood closed. They wouldn't have to go so far.

"Who's that?" a man's voice said.

In a recess, a man in hunting leather stood up from where he'd been sitting. The guard.

"My husband sent for me," Phelia said. "They said he was in his private office."

“He ain’t,” the guard said. “Who’re these?”

“The people my husband asked me to bring,” Phelia said tartly. Clara could hear the fear in her voice, the despair. She felt a surge of pride for the woman’s courage.

“He is here,” the priest said. His voice had an odd, unpleasant throbbing quality. “You’ve made a mistake. He’s in the room behind you.”

“No one in there, I’m telling you.”

“Listen. Listen. You’ve made a mistake,” the priest said again. “He’s in the room behind you. Knock on the door and he’ll answer.”

From the look on the guard’s face, Clara was fairly sure anyone beside the lady of the household would have already been knocked to the ground and reinforcements shouted for. Instead, the man turned to knock on the oaken door and Vincen Coe stepped up behind him, wrapping an arm across the guard’s neck and lifting him. The man choked and kicked, his hand clawing at Vincen’s arm. Clara closed her eyes, and the sounds alone were worse than the sight. After entirely too long, the guard went slack. Vincen lowered the body to the floor and stood with the guard’s drawn sword in his hand. Phelia drew a key from her sleeve, fitted it to the lock, and a moment later they were in Feldin Maas’s private study.

Vincen brought a candle in from the hallway, and by its light he found and lit the lamps. The room slowly grew lighter, taken by a dark, sullen sort of dawn. Shelves of dark wood and a thin writing desk with a brass inkwell and a white fluff of a feather quill. It was a larger space than Clara had expected. There were no windows, and a lattice of dark and light against one wall led her to think the room had once been used to store bottles. Phelia walked to the shelves like she was walking in her sleep. From amid the clutter of scrolls and codices, she took a simple wooden box, its top fastened with a hook and hinged with leather. She held it out to Geder Palliako.

“They’re ciphered,” she said. “I don’t know the code.”

Geder took the box, grinning like a boy with an unexpected present. As soon as it left her hand, Phelia closed in on herself, as if her bones had gone soft and smaller.

“Thank you, dear,” Clara said. “It was the only way. You know it was the only way.”

Her shrug was painful to watch.

“I don’t know how it came this far,” she said. “I truly don’t. If I could have—”

The roar was inhuman. Anger and wildfire and murder made sound. Clara screamed even before she knew what it was.

“What in hell is this?”

Feldin Maas stood in the doorway, a bare blade in his hand. His face

was flushed almost purple with rage. Two more men stood behind him, blocked from entering. *If he closes that door,* Clara thought, *we're trapped. And if we're trapped, we're dead.*

"No, Feldin," Phelia said, walking forward. "It's the right thing. It's what we have to do. Lord Palliako's promised mercy. He knew everything anyway."

"You *brought* them here? *You* betrayed *me*?"

"I—"

Maas's sword reached out swift and sudden as a lightning strike. Clara, behind her cousin, didn't see the blade strike home, but she heard it. She saw the horrible play over Feldin Maas's face: surprise, horror, grief, rage. Even before the blood, Clara knew the woman was dead.

Vincen Coe boiled past her, shouting and swinging his stolen blade like a scythe in a meadow. Maas fell back into the hallway from the sheer animal force of the attack. For a moment, the doorway was clear. Geder Palliako stood over the fallen woman, his jaw slack and his face pale. Clara pushed him, moving him toward the door.

"Go!" she shouted. "Before they seal us in!"

Geder and the priest hurried out. The sound of blade against blade almost made Clara pause. *I'll surrender,* she thought. They wouldn't harm a woman. It was an idiot's thought. A reflex. Against all instinct, she ran out toward the fighting.

If the corridor had been wider, Feldin and his two guards would already have gotten around Vincen and cut him down. Instead, the huntsman swung hard and fast, his blade filling the space, holding them at bay. Sweat was pouring down his face, and his breath was fast. Feldin waited with a duelist's eyes, looking for an opportunity.

"Run!" Vincen shouted. "I'll win you what time I can!"

Geder Palliako needed no more urging. He turned, sprinting down the hall toward the staircase and double doors. She caught a glimpse of the wooden box still in his hand. She took four steps after him, but turned back. The priest moved just behind her, retreating from the fight, but not fleeing. Vincen's shoulders worked like a laborer's.

"Oh," she heard herself say. "Oh, not this. Not this."

Feldin's blade swung high and hard, batting Vincen's swing aside. The guard to Feldin's left thrust past him, and Vincen grunted, leaping back. There was blood on the guard's blade. Vincen's blood, spilling on the floor.

"You can't win," the priest said, his voice loud and throbbing. Clara looked up at him, tears in her eyes, but he smiled and shook his huge head. "Lord Maas, listen to my voice. Listen to me. You cannot win."

"I will see your guts," Maas shouted.

"You won't. Everything you love is already gone. Everything you

hoped for is already lost. You can't win. The fight is over. You've lost everything already. You have no reason to fight."

Feldin surged forward, but even Clara could see the change in his stance. His swing was more tentative, his weight on his back foot, as if reluctant to engage the fight he had just been winning. Vincen drew back, limping badly. His leathers were red and wet. Feldin didn't step forward.

"You saw her die, Lord Maas," the priest said. "You saw her fall. She has gone, and you can't bring her back. Listen to my voice. *Listen* to me. The fight's lost. Nothing you can do here matters. You can feel that. That thickness in your throat. You feel it. You know what it means. You cannot win. You cannot win. You cannot win."

One of the guards moved forward, his blade before him, but his gaze kept cutting back to Feldin. Feldin, whose eyes were caught on nothing. Vincen started to close with the man, but Clara rushed forward, put her hand on his arm, pulled him back.

"You can feel the despair in your belly, can't you? You feel it," the priest said. His voice was sorrowful, as if he regretted every word. Each syllable throbbed and echoed within itself. "You feel it in your heart. You're drowning in it, and it will never end. There is no hope. Not now. Not ever. You cannot win, Lord Maas. You *cannot* win. There is nothing for you. You've lost it all, and you know it."

"Lord Maas?" his guard said.

The point of Feldin's blade lowered to the floor like he was drawing a vertical line in the empty air. In the candlelight, it was hard to see, but she thought there were tears on his mask-empty face. The guards looked at each other, confused and unnerved. Feldin dropped his sword to the ground, turned, and walked away down the corridor. Clara trembled. The huge priest put one hand on her shoulder, one on Vincen Coe's.

"We should leave before he changes his opinion," the priest said.

They backed down the hallway, leaving a track of blood. The guards took a few uncertain steps toward them, then back toward their retreating lord. They reminded Clara of nothing more than hunting dogs given two conflicting commands. When they reached the double doors, Vincen stumbled. The priest lifted him up, slinging him over a shoulder. It took them minutes to find a door that led out, what seemed half the night to negotiate the darkened gardens and reach the edge of Maas's estate. A thick hedge marked the border, and the priest knelt by it, rolling Vincen Coe's body to the ground. There were voices in the night. Shouting and calling. Searching, Clara thought, for them.

"Under here," he said. "Watch over him. I'll bring a cart."

Clara knelt, pushing herself in through the twigs and leaves. The hedge had little space beneath it, but there was some. Vincen Coe

dragged himself in after her, digging his elbows into the litter of dead leaves and old dirt. His face was ashen, and everything from his belly down was wet and slick. In the darkness, the blood wasn't red, but black. She pulled him in close to her as best she could without proper leverage. She had the sudden visceral memory of being thirteen, hiding in her father's gardens while one of her uncles dashed about pretending he didn't know where she was. She shook her head. The memory was too innocent for the moment.

Vincen rolled onto his back with a groan.

"How bad is it?" she whispered.

"Unpleasant," Vincen said.

"If Maas uses his dogs, we're as good as found."

Vincen shook his head, the leaves under him making the softest crackling sound.

"By now, I'm sure everything on the estate stinks of me," he said. "Take them till morning to find which blood's freshest."

"Still feeling well enough to joke, I see."

"Yes, my lady."

Clara struggled to rise, squinting through the leaves. There was more shouting now. And, unless she was mistaken, the crash of swordplay. She felt sure she heard Jorey's voice raised in command. In the close confines of their shelter, she felt the huntsman's fast, shallow breath as much as heard it.

"Be strong a bit longer," she said. "Just a bit longer."

When he reached his hand to her, she thought it might be the last gesture of a dying man, but his fingers curled around the back of her neck, drawing her toward him with a definite strength. His lips were rough against hers, surprising and intimate and strong. Clara was shocked, but then gave a little internal shrug. The young man might be dead in the next few minutes, so really where was the harm?

When he released her, his head dropping the inch back to the ground, Clara wiped her mouth with the back of a well-soiled hand. Her lips felt pleasantly bruised, her mind by turns scandalized, flattered, and amused.

"You forget yourself," she said reprovingly.

"I do, my lady," the huntsman said. "With you, I often do."

His eyes fluttered closed. His breath remained painful and quick, and Clara lay in the darkness, willing it to continue until she heard voices she knew as her own household, and started shouting for help.

Marcus

Qahuar Em scratched his chin, his head tilted at a considering angle. Marcus kept his expression bland. The table they sat across was polished oak with a burned-in knotwork pattern. It didn't have the green banker's felt that Cithrin used. Marcus had expected that it would, but perhaps the customs were different in Lyoneia. The tiny box that sat on the table was black iron with a lid that hinged on the side and the image of a dragon on the front. If there was some significance to the design she had chosen, he didn't know it.

"I'm sorry," Qahuar Em said. "This is confusing."

"Nothing odd about it," Marcus said. "Banks and merchant houses hold items of interest for each other all the time, I'm told."

"When they're closely allied, and one has people in a city where the other doesn't," Qahuar said. "Neither of those applies here."

"Strange circumstances."

"Which you aren't going to explain to me."

"I'm not," Marcus agreed.

Qahuar reached over and picked up the little box, cupping it easily in one palm. The lid opened with a clank, uncovering a brass key shorter than a finger bone. Marcus scratched his ear and waited for the man to speak.

"Why do I think this is going to be connected to something disagreeable and embarrassing?" Qahuar asked, making it clear from his tone that an answer would be welcome but wasn't expected.

"I'm authorized to sign a statement that it's here at the request of Magistra bel Sarcour," Marcus said. "Press the key into wax and I'll put my thumb across it so there's no question we're talking about the same one. Anything you like."

The box closed again. The near-scaled fingertips tapped the oak with a sound like the first hard drops of a thunderstorm.

"I'm prepared to take no for an answer," Marcus said.

"The magistra and I didn't part on the best of terms," Qahuar said, pronouncing his words carefully. "She sent you rather than come herself. I find it hard to believe she's come to trust me."

"There's ways you can trust an enemy you can't always trust a friend. An enemy's never going to betray your trust."

"I think she would say I'd betrayed hers, and I can argue she did mine."

"Proves my point. You two were being friendly back then," Marcus

said with a smile they both knew he didn't mean.

A soft knock came at the meeting room door. A full Jasuru woman in robes of grey and scarlet nodded to both men.

"The men from the shipyard, sir."

Qahuar nodded, and the woman retreated, closing the door behind her with a soft click.

"Going well, that?" Marcus asked.

"Well enough. It will take a year at least to have everything in order, but time moves both ways. Actions can have effects long before they themselves happen."

"Angry letters from the king of Cabral, for example?"

"Sometimes I wish I'd lost," Qahuar said. And then, "For more reasons than one. Captain, we're men well acquainted the world. I think we understand each other. Would you answer a question?"

"You won't mind if I lie?"

"Not at all. You're a man whose name is known all through the west. At the head of a private army, you could command any price you ask, but you're working guard captain for a branch bank. You aren't open to bribery. And—forgive me—you don't like me very much."

"None of that's a question."

"Are you in love with her?"

"I've loved a lot of people, and the word hasn't meant the same thing twice," Marcus said. "The job is to protect her, and I'm going to do the job this time."

"This time?"

Marcus shrugged and kept quiet. The bastard had gotten him to say more than he meant already. Marcus had to give it; Qahuar was good at what he did. The half-Jasuru stood up, his lips pursed. Slowly, deliberately, he put the box in the pouch at his belt.

"I hope I'm not going to regret this," he said.

"I expect it won't matter to you one way or the other," Marcus said. "For what it's worth, though, I appreciate your taking it on."

"You know it's not as a favor to you?"

"Do."

Qahuar Em held out a broad hand. Marcus rose to his feet and took it. It was an effort not to squeeze a little hard, just to show he could. The man's bright green eyes looked amused. And maybe something sadder as well.

"She's a lucky woman," Qahuar said.

God, let's hope so, Marcus thought but didn't say.

Autumn had come to Porte Oliva overnight. Trees that had been lush and full were dropping leaves that were still green in the center. The sunset winds were loud with their skittering. The bay had turned

the color of tea, and stank at midday like a compost heap. The queensmen patrolling the twilight streets wore overcoats of wool and green caps that covered their ears. Marcus walked the narrow streets near the port, feeling the first bite of night's chill, and decided maybe he liked the city after all.

He found Master Kit and the others in a torchlit courtyard between a taphouse and an inn. Smit and Hornet were still putting the last adjustments on the stage supports while Master Kit barked instructions to them, not even in costume yet. A young woman was pacing behind them. She was fair-haired with large eyes that left Marcus thinking of babies and a tight-bound dress that showed her figure. Her hands were knotted before her, fingers wrestling one another like fighters in a melee.

Marcus walked over to Master Kit. Instead of saying hello, he nodded to the woman.

"New one?"

"Yes," the old actor said. "I have hope for this one."

"Had hope for the last one too."

"Fair enough. I have expectations of this one," Master Kit said. "Calls herself Charlit Soon, and I find she rehearses wonderfully. Tonight we'll see how she does with an audience. If she stays through tomorrow, I think I've found my full company."

"And she's what? Twelve years old?"

"Cinnae blood some generations back," Master Kit said. "Or that's the story, anyway. She believes it, and it may even be true."

"But you don't believe it?"

"I withhold judgment."

As if she'd heard them, the new actor glanced over at them and then away. Sandr jumped out the back of the cart and waved to Marcus. Either his fear had faded or he was a decent actor. Marcus waved back. Mikel, thin and weedy as ever, came out from the taphouse with a bucket of sawdust, Cary following behind with a broom.

"I heard rumor you might be leaving Porte Oliva."

"It's one possibility," Master Kit said. "We've played here almost an entire theatrical season. I think cities can get full on plays. Show too many, and I believe people become complacent. I don't want what we do to lose its magic. I was thinking of taking the company up to the queen's court at Sara-su-mar."

"Before the winter, or after?"

"I'll know more after Charlit's been onstage for a few nights," Master Kit said. "But probably before. When the ships leave for Narinisle."

"Well, do what's right, but I'll be sorry to see you go."

"I take it you're staying for the foreseeable future?" Kit said. Mikel

began spreading the sawdust on the flagstone paving of the courtyard to soak up the damp, Cary sweeping along behind him. It seemed like an odd thing to do. The yard was only going to fill up with mud and piss and rain again.

"I can count the foreseeable future in days," Marcus said. "Weeks at best."

"You'd be welcome to travel with us," Master Kit said. "Yardem and Cithrin too. I think we all miss being caravan guards, just a little. It wasn't a role we'd ever had before, and I don't expect we will again."

"Master Kit?" Sandr called from behind the cart. "One of the swords is missing."

"I believe it's with Smit's bandit robe."

"It isn't."

Master Kit sighed, and Marcus clapped him on the shoulder and left him to his work.

Lantern flames and barn heat made the interior of the taproom warmer than the streets. The scent of roasting pork and beer competed with the less pleasant smell of close-packed bodies. Marcus kept one hand on his coins as he walked through the press. With so many distractions and people in so small a space, he'd have been shocked if there wasn't at least one cutpurse looking for a little luck. He saw Yardem first, sitting at a back table, then as he got closer, Enen and Roach, Cithrin and… Barth. That was his name. The Firstbloods were Corisen Mout and Barth, and Corisen Mout had the bad front tooth. Feeling unaccountably pleased with himself, Marcus sat at the table.

Cithrin raised her eyebrows, asking.

"It's done," Marcus said. "You? Things went well with the governor?"

"Fine," Cithrin said. "Paid the fee, left the box."

"The receipt?"

"Burned it," Cithrin said. "There won't be a trail back. As long as the governor doesn't get curious and force the lock, we're as ready as we're likely to get."

A servant hurried over, put a tankard of ale on the table in front of Marcus, and reached to take Cithrin's away. She stopped him, and he nodded his bow and darted away.

"What are the chances that the governor's baser instincts will get the better of him?" Marcus asked instead of *How much have you drunk?* If she were in danger of losing herself, Yardem would have stopped her. Maybe already had.

"Life is risk," she said as Roach, sitting beside her, sipped ale from his own tankard.

"Yardem was just telling us about the shapes of people's souls," Barth said. "Did you know your soul's a circle?"

Marcus shot a pained look at Yardem. The flick of an ear was the closest he got to an apology.

"Don't listen to anything he says, Barth. He's religious. It makes him nervous when things are going well."

"Wasn't aware they were going well, sir," Yardem said dryly.

Over the next hour, Marcus drank his tankard of ale, ate a plate of roast pork with a black sauce hot enough to bring tears to his eyes, and listened to the talk around the table. Barth kept on Yardem about souls and destiny, but Enen and Roach and Cithrin chewed on more practical matters: how many payments would be coming to the bank proper and how many to the room at the café, how to assure that no one attacked whoever carried the café payments across the city, whether to make arrangements with the queensmen to help enforce their private contracts. All the business and consideration of a bank's owner to her people. Cithrin spoke like a woman sure of her fate, and Marcus admired her for that.

The banging of a stick on a tin pan interrupted them.

"Show's to start!" Mikel's voice threaded through the noise of the taproom. "Come and watch the show! Show's to start!"

Marcus dropped a few coins on the table, rose, and, half joking, offered Cithrin his hand.

"Shall we?" he asked.

She accepted his support with a mocking formality.

"It's what we've come here for," she said. Marcus led her and the members of his new company out to the pleasant cool of the courtyard to watch his old one. The crowd was good. Easily fifty people, and more likely to stop as they went in or out. When Master Kit strode out on the boards, his wiry hair pulled back and a sword strapped to his hip, a few people applauded, Marcus among them. Sandr came out a moment later, pretending to pick his teeth with a blunted dagger.

"You, Pintin, have been my second in command these many years," Master Kit said, thrusting out his chin in parody of heroism. "From the moments of my highest glory and the depths of my despair, you have followed me. Now once again the hounds of war are loosed, and we must fly before them. The armies of dark Sarakal descend upon the city tomorrow."

"Best we get out tonight, then," Sandr said. The crowd chuckled.

"Indeed, ours is not to stand and fight the doomèd fight. The city surely shall fall, and before it does, Lady Daneillin—last of her house and gentlest beauty of Elassae—must be taken safe away. That is our great work, Pintin. Our company is to fly this night with the great lady in our charge."

"Yeah, problem with that," Sandr said in his Pintin voice. "The men were on the city wall seeing who could piss the farthest. Seems the

magistrate thought it was raining. They're all in the city gaol."

Master Kit paused. The self-importance in his jaw melted.

"*What?*" he shrieked in comic falsetto. More people laughed. They were warming to it.

Marcus leaned toward Yardem Hane.

"I'm not like that, though," he said. "All that high dramatic talk and sucking my gut in. That's not what I'm like."

"Not at all, sir," Yardem said.

Two days later, Cithrin sat across the café table from him. A light rain pattered outside the open doors and windows, the stones at the entrance of the Grand Market darkened almost black. Behind him, two Kurtadam men were talking about the latest news from Northcoast. Another war of succession seemed almost certain. Marcus told himself he didn't care, and for the most part that was true. The world smelled of coffee and raindrops.

"If we have the free coin, I'm thinking about sponsoring one of the Narinisle ships next year," Cithrin said.

Marcus nodded.

"There's going to be uncertainty about the new fleet idea. Especially at first. If it's a success, even just for the first couple of years, it's going to increase the traffic through Porte Oliva. That could be a very good thing for us, so long as we're in position. Known to everyone. Trusted."

"All that assuming," Marcus said.

Cithrin swallowed. She'd lost weight in the last weeks, and her skin, while always pale, was growing pallid. It was odd to him that none of the men who came asking her patronage for a loan or offering to deposit their wealth with her for a discreet return appeared to notice that the anxiety was eating her. She wasn't sleeping enough. But she wasn't drinking herself to sleep either. That counted as strength enough for him.

"All that assuming," she agreed. And then, "Do you ever wish we'd run? Filled our pockets and just… gone?"

"Ask me again once the auditor's left," Marcus said.

She nodded. The ancient, half-blind Cinnae man limped in from the back. The rain seemed to have no good effect on his hips. Cithrin raised her empty cup, and Maestro Ansanpur nodded with a knowing smile and turned back around.

"Magister Imaniel always said that waiting was the hardest thing," she said. "That the easiest way to lose was to get impatient. Do something for the sake of doing something and not because it's right. That always sounded obvious when he said it. He and Cam were the

nearest thing I had to parents. I was with the bank almost as soon as I could walk. He knew everything about money and risk and how to appear one way when you're actually something else."

"He'd have made a good general, sounds like," Marcus said.

"No," she said. "I don't know. Maybe. He didn't like soldiers, though. He didn't like war. I remember he used to say that there are two ways to meet the world. You go out with a blade in your hand or else with a purse."

"Really? And here I thought there was money to be made from war."

"There is," Cithrin said. "But only if you're standing in exactly the right place. In the larger sense, there's always more lost in the fight than there is won. The way he said things, it sounded like we were all that kept the swords in their scabbards. War or trade. Dagger and coin. Those were the two kinds of people."

"Sounds like you miss him."

Cithrin nodded, then shrugged, then nodded again.

"I do, but not the way I thought I would. I thought it would all be about wanting to ask him what he knew, but most times when I think of him, it's just that it would be nice to hear his voice. And I don't even think of him as often as I'd expected."

"You've changed since you saw him," Marcus said. "That's one of the things Yardem used to tell me that actually made sense. He said that you don't go through grief like it was a chore to be done. You can't push and get finished quicker. The best you can do is change the way you always do, and the time comes when you aren't the same person who was in pain."

"And did that work for you?"

"Hasn't yet," Marcus said.

Maestro Asanpur returned with a fresh cup in his trembling hand. He placed it before Cithrin with a faint clink of fine ceramic. She blew across the surface of it, scattering the steam with her breath. When she sipped it, her smile lit the old Cinnae's face.

"Thank you, Maestro," she said.

"Thank *you,* Magistra," he said, and limped forward to close the shutters against the chill.

The patter of the raindrops grew heavier, the splashes like little detonations of white against the grey. She was right. Waiting for battle was the hardest part. Unless you got a dagger in your gut during the battle. Then that was hardest. Or you got through just fine and saw your men dead around you. Then that was.

Yardem appeared at the far side of the square, a darker shadow in a world made from them. He didn't run, didn't even hurry. Marcus watched the Tralgu endure his way past the queensmen and the

market. With each step, he seemed to grow more solid. More real. He ducked his head as he came in the door.

"Sir."

"All right," Marcus said, his throat and chest tight. "All right."

Cithrin stood up. She looked calm. It would have taken living with her for the better part of a year to see the fear in her eyes and the angle of her chin.

"The auditor's come, then?" she said.

Yardem flicked his ears and nodded.

"He has, ma'am."

Cithrin

Paerin Clark.

Sometime during her years in Vanai, she must have heard the name. The syllables had a familiarity without detail, like a name from history or myth. Drakis Stormcrow. The Risen Guard. Aesa, Princess of Swords.

Paerin Clark.

Cithrin plucked at her skirt, keeping the lines of it neat and straight. Her heart pounded against her ribs like a trapped bird. Her belly was a solid knot that veered between cramping and nausea. She wanted something to drink. Something powerful that would loosen her muscles, calm her, give her courage. Instead she held herself the way Master Kit had taught her, her shoulders low and back, her spine loose, and prayed that she looked like a woman in full possession of her powers instead of a half-grown girl in her mother's clothes.

The mild-looking man sat at her desk, in her rooms, with his legs crossed and his fingers laced across his knee. His hairline was receding. His shoulders were narrow. He could have been anybody. He could have been no one. His notebook lay open on the table, a steel pen across it, but he didn't write notes. Not even ciphered ones. He asked his questions gently, and smiled when she spoke. His Northcoast accent was soft at the corners. Where other men's words hissed, his shushed.

"Magister Imaniel had no part in this, then?"

"No, none," Cithrin said. "The intention was solely that we should take the bank's Vanai assets to Carse. As far as Magister Imaniel knew, we were doing just that. If the snows hadn't come early to the pass at Bellin, we would have followed that plan."

"And the decision to divert to the south?"

"That was Captain Wester's."

"Tell me more about that."

No voices came from below them. Captain Wester and the guards were gone, sent out of the house by Clark. A dozen sword-and-bows that he'd brought with him had taken their place. The silence seemed wrong. Eerie. The rain pattered against the windows like a thousand tiny fingers poking at her, and the thunder muttered ominously in the distance. Cithrin recounted everything she could in the detail she could manage. Being intercepted by the Antean forces, smuggling the cart into Porte Oliva, hiding in the salt quarter.

“And only Captain Wester and his Tralgu were acting as guard at this point?”

“I don’t know that I’d call Yardem ‘his Tralgu.’ ”

“They were the only two guards?”

“Yes,” Cithrin said.

“Thank you.”

She told about the attack by Opal, about Marcus’s fears of leaving the city and his fears of staying. She was careful, when she described forging the documents, to keep her tone calm and matter-of-fact. Magister Imaniel had always said that appearing guilty gave them the impression there was something to feel guilty for. When she admitted to filing false papers with the governor of Porte Oliva, the auditor didn’t comment or even change expression. Once she was past the history of founding her false branch of the bank and began to outline her investments, loans, consignments, and commissions, she felt herself starting to relax.

She talked for the greater part of the evening. Her voice grew hoarse, and her back began to ache from sitting too long in one position. If Paerin suffered the same, he didn’t show it.

“How much did Captin Wester advise you on these strategies?”

“He didn’t,” Cithrin said. “He didn’t try, and I didn’t ask him to.”

“Why not?”

“He’s not a banker. I gave him a budget that I thought was appropriate for the protection of the gold we kept here and for the moving of any substantial amounts within the city, but that’s all.”

“I see. Well. Thank you, Mistress bel Sarcour. That was the most interesting story I’ve heard in some time. I assume all the books and records are here?”

“Yes,” she said. “I’ve also taken a room at a café by the Grand Market, but all of those records have been brought here.”

“Excellent.”

“I would also like to make a suggestion? If I may.”

Paerin Clark raised his eyebrows. Cithrin took a deep breath.

“Due to circumstances,” she said, “I have been identified closely with the bank here in the city. With the branch being so recently established, I think it wouldn’t be in anybody’s interest to change that. Once you’ve completed your audit, I hope you’ll consider keeping me on as the public face of the branch.”

Clark took up his pen and closed the still-unmarked notebook.

“I think you have misunderstood the situation,” he said. “This… let’s call it misadventure… has embarrassed the Medean bank in general and Komme Medean in particular. It has disrupted negotiations in Herez and Northcoast, and taken resources, myself included, away from some profoundly important situations. From

what you've told me, I expect you've been taken in by a mercenary captain for reasons I haven't fathomed yet. But I am very, very good at what I do. If there's anything here you haven't told me, I will find it. I'm going to spend as long as it takes to review every transaction you've made. I already have three men going through the city asking about your activity. If there's anything that's not in these books, I'll find that too. And public gaol in Porte Oliva is far from the worst thing that can happen from here.

"Now, before I get started, I have one last question. I will ask you this only once. If you tell me the truth, I am in a position to see you're treated mercifully. If you lie, I can make your life unbearable. You understand?"

She should have been frightened. That was what Clark intended, certainly. Instead, an odd peace flowed into her. He was bullying her. He was condescending to her. He was underestimating her. And so her last reservations were laid to rest. The man was an ass, and anything she did to him would be justified.

"I understand," she said. She saw him hesitate, hearing something in her voice he hadn't expected. She smiled. "What was your question?"

"What aren't you telling me?" he asked

That I'm going to beat you, Cithrin thought. *That I am going to win.*

"If you have any questions, Master Clark, I am at your disposal," Cithrin said. "But my numbers balance."

For the next week, she lived in exile, sitting in the café or walking through the city streets during the days, sleeping at night at an inn not far from her bank. The auditor called upon her daily with lists of questions and clarifications: Why was the rate of interest specified in this contract, but not in another? Why was a particular sum withdrawn from the bank's reserves, and when would it be returned? Why was this loan accepted when another apparently of greater merit was refused? Cithrin sat in her rooms—*hers,* dammit—and allowed herself to be subjected to the examination. She knew every answer, and after a few days, it became something of a game to watch Clark try to catch her out. He was smart, and he knew his business. She even found herself respecting him. He had been doing this work since Cithrin was a hardly more than a child.

But then, so had she.

The ships left for Narinisle. They carried pressed oil, wine, cotton cloth, and the dreams and hopes of the merchant houses of Porte Oliva. But they didn't carry any agreements of capital from the Medean bank in Porte Oliva, because the audit was still progressing.

Next year, maybe.

Cithrin stood on the seawall and watched the ships depart, towed out past the dangers of the bay, and then sails rising up and filling like spring flowers in bloom. She stood silently until they faded into the grey between sea and sky, and then she watched the haze. Seagulls called and turned in the wide air, complaining or celebrating. At her side, Captain Wester crossed his arms.

"Another one came to the café this morning," he said. "Your brewer lady and her son."

"What did you tell them?"

"Yardem talked with them. He said the same as the others. The audit's normal for a new branch, and please to go along with whatever the man asks. She wasn't happy. Wanted to talk with you. Didn't like it when he said that the two of you comparing notes would only make the auditor's job harder. Accused Yardem of accusing her of something."

"I'm sorry about that," Cithrin said. "I'd stop this all if I could."

"I know."

Cithrin pulled her cloak closer around her and turned away from the limitless sea back toward the city. Her city. She wasn't sure when it had become hers.

"With luck, we'll be back to normal before long."

He fell in at her side. She couldn't say if she matched his stride or if he matched hers.

"You still have the option of walking away," he said. "I can go get the key back. You can reclaim the box from the governor's palace. It wouldn't be so bad. Carse is a decent enough city. Even if there is trouble with the succession, you'd be safe there. No one tries to put Carse under siege. Give it a year, take your money. You could do anything."

"I couldn't do this," Cithrin said.

"Fair point."

They walked down long, whitewashed steps and along the wall toward the salt quarter. Somewhere along the way, they passed the spot where Opal had died, but she didn't recognize it and she didn't ask. A small wire-haired dog trotted by, yipped at them, and sped away when Marcus pretended to reach down for a rock to throw.

"Notice you haven't been drinking," he said.

I would drown a small child for a bottle of wine, Cithrin thought, *but I am going to need my wits, and there won't be any warning.*

"I don't miss it," she said.

"You haven't been sleeping."

"Don't miss that either."

The inn that had become their home while the bank itself remained

under occupation sat at the corner of two of the larger of Porte Oliva's narrow streets. Its white walls and wooden roof looked cold under the low clouds. As they came near, a man stepped out of the doorway. She saw Marcus become alert without changing his stride. She felt a low burning in her throat.

The man came toward them. One of Paerin Clark's guards.

"He wants to see me?" Cithrin asked.

"Same as always, miss," the guard said. "I think he's finished up."

Cithrin took a deep breath. The time had come.

"May I bring the captain along?"

"Don't see why not."

The walk back to the bank was short, but Cithrin felt every step of it. It occurred to her that the dress she was wearing was the first she'd bought when she came to Porte Oliva, the one she'd invented Hallskari salt dyes for in exchange for a five-coin reduction. The dress of a truly dangerous woman. She tried to take it as a good omen.

A Kurtadam boy walked by selling paper funnels with honeyed almonds, and Cithrin stopped to buy one. She popped two in her mouth, gave one to Marcus. Paerin's guard waited, and she tipped the paper toward him. Smiling, he took two. So he was willing to accept gifts from her. That meant he was either a cold bastard to the bone, or the news from the auditor was good. No, she thought, it meant the guard *believed* it was good.

For twenty days, she had been denied her room. Walking back up the stairs, she was prepared to choke down outrage, but when she reached the top, everything was precisely as it had been. Paerin Clark might have been a ghost for all the trace he left of himself.

The man sat at her desk. He was writing now, the illegible symbols of cipher coming from the nib of his pen without need of a code book. He nodded to Cithrin and then to Marcus, finished the line of script, and turned to them.

"Mistress bel Sarcour," he said. "I had one last question for you. I hope you don't mind."

His tone had changed markedly. She could hear the respect in it. That was fair. She'd earned it.

"Of course."

"I'm fairly sure I've guessed the answer, but there's a sum placed aside in the most recent books. Six hundred twelve weight of silver?"

"The quarter's profit for the holding company," she said.

"Yes," the auditor said. "That's what I thought. Please, have a seat both of you."

Marcus gave her the stool, choosing to stand behind her.

"I have to say, I am impressed with all this. Magister Imaniel trained you very, very well. We have, of course, suffered some loss.

But in the main, the contracts you've made seem sound. The city fleet project was, I think, ill-advised, but since they refused your offer we don't have to concern ourselves with that."

Cithrin wondered what it was about the fleet that the auditor found problematic, but he was still speaking.

"I am making my report to the holding company now. My primary finding is that what you have done here was honestly intended to be in the interests of the bank as a whole. We are, unfortunately, obligated to a length of contract in Porte Oliva that doesn't match what we'd like, but I know you were doing the best you could. And while some aspects of your behavior were certainly outside the law, I see no advantage to seeking any legal redress."

"He means we got away with it?" Marcus asked.

"He does," Cithrin said.

"Good to know."

Paerin tapped his fingertips against the top of the desk, the deep lines of a frown marking his high forehead.

"I don't want to be forward, and I can't, of course, make any guarantees," he said, "but there may be a position for a woman with your talents in Carse. I would need to discuss it with Komme Medean and some of the other directors. But if you would like to make a career as a banker, I think you could find a start there."

You still have the option of walking away, Marcus had said less than hour earlier. She still did. It was time to burn that hope.

"I would prefer to have a start here," Cithrin said. "Have you considered my proposal?"

Paerin Clark looked at her blankly. Then, embarrassed for her, he nodded.

"Yes, that. No. We will be putting a recognized member of the bank in charge of the branch until it can be dissolved. Keeping you in your present position isn't possible."

Marcus chuckled.

"Does it make me a bad man that I was hoping he would say that?" he asked.

Cithrin ignored him. When she spoke, she sat straight and looked the auditor in the eye.

"You've overlooked something, sir. There's a record book from Vanai that isn't among these. It's an old one, though. It doesn't touch directly on your audit."

Paerin Clark shifted his chair to face her. He crossed his arms over his chest.

"It is the book that records my status as ward of the bank," Cithrin said. "It shows my legal age, and the date upon which I can begin to sign legally binding contracts. That would be next summer."

"I don't see how that—"

Cithrin gestured to the books, the piles of paper and parchment, the entire mechanism of her bank.

"None of these contracts is legal," she said. "I am not legally permitted to enter into any agreement. I'm ten months too young."

Paerin Clark's expression was the same bland smile he'd worn the first day he'd come. It might only have been her imagination that he was a shade paler. Cithin swallowed to loosen the knot in her throat.

"If the information in that book becomes public," she said, "the bank will have to resort to direct appeal to the governor to either enforce the contracts anyway or reclaim the sums that were given out. I've met the governor, and I think that he is unlikely to take money away from his citizens to give to a bank that's in a hurry to abandon his city."

"And the book in question is where?" Paerin Clark asked.

"In a strongbox deposited with the governor under my name privately and separately from the bank. And the key to the box is in the keeping of a man with no incentive to see the bank succeed here. If I tell him what it unlocks, you can burn all these papers to light your cookfires."

"You're bluffing. If this comes out, you're guilty of forgery, theft. Misrepresentation. You'll be in gaol for the rest of your life, and all we'll lose is money."

"I can get her out of here," Marcus said. "A city's complement of queensmen half incapacitated from laughing at you? I can get her out of Birancour and in a decent house by midwinter."

"We are the Medean bank," Paerin Clark said. "You can't outrun us."

"I'm Marcus Wester. I've killed kings, and I'm lousy at bluffing. Threaten her again, and—"

"Stop it, both of you," Cithrin said. "Here's my offer. Keep the branch as it is, but install a notary from the holding company. We say it's to help with the workload. I'm the face and voice, but the notary oversees all the agreements."

"And when I refuse?"

She wanted a drink. She wanted a warm bed and man's arms around her. She wanted to know for certain that she was doing the right thing.

"I burn this branch to the ground," she said.

The world balanced on the edge of a blade. The auditor closed his eyes, leaned back in his chair. *Ah well,* Cithrin thought. *Life as a fugitive wasn't so bad last winter. At least this time I can wear my own clothes.* Paerin Clark opened his eyes.

"You sign nothing," he said. "All agreements are signed by the

notary and the notary alone. Negotiations don't happen without the notary present. If you're overruled, you accept it. Control rests with the holding company. You're a figurehead. Nothing more."

"I can live with that," she said. And also, unspoken: *Until I can change it, I can live with that.*

"And you return the missing book with evidence of your age to me. Before I leave the city."

"No," Marcus said. "She gives you that, she's got no purchase. You could go back on everything, and she'd have nothing."

"She'll have to trust me."

Cithrin swallowed. She wanted to vomit. She wanted to sing.

She nodded. Paerin Clark was still for a long moment, then he picked up the papers he'd been writing, sighed, and ripped them into small squares.

"It seems I have a somewhat different report to write," he said, smiling wryly. "Congratulations on your new bank, Magistra."

Geder

The funeral rites of Phelia Maas were somewhat overshadowed by the execution of her husband. Geder, given the choice, had opted for the execution, as had the majority of the great names at court. King Simeon's throne sat on a raised dais. Aster sat beside him in a smaller chair of the same design. King and prince both wore black ermine. Then there was the broad expanse of the chamber, Feldin Maas kneeling in its center. His ankles and wrists were bound with wire, and even from the gallery behind the woven rope, Geder could see the bruises on the man's legs and the long black scabs across his back. Ten executioners stood in a rough circle around the prisoner. Their masks were steel and made to look like snarling animals, and their blades were dull and rusted.

A single drum beat out its dry call. It was the only sound apart from some idiot whispering at the back the crowd. Geder tried to ignore the people and focus on the spectacle. Even though he'd arrived late, the assembled nobles had made room for him, so he had an excellent view just at the edge of the gallery. Dawson Kalliam and his two sons stood next to him. Geder was wearing his black leather cloak from Vanai, but the cut of it was all wrong now. His body had changed shape over the summer, and it hung loose on him. He wished he'd thought to get it recut. Everyone who wasn't watching Feldin Maas die seemed to be looking at him.

King Simeon, gray in the face and severe, lifted his arm. The drum went silent. The mass of people in all three levels of the gallery took in their breath. Even the idiot at the back stopped talking.

"You have the courtesy of a final statement, traitor," the king said.

Feldin Maas shook his head slowly. *No.*

The king's arm fell. The executioners moved in, each man sinking the point of his blade hard into the man's flesh. Geder had been led to believe that the blades were fairly dull, and the force each of the killers used reinforced the idea. Maas cried out once, but only once. When the executioners stood back, he lay in a spreading pool of blood, the ten blades sticking out of his body. The assembly around him let its breath out with a sound like wind through trees.

King Simeon stood. Behind him, Prince Aster looked like a statue of himself carved from pale stone. Geder wondered what it would be like for a boy just past his ninth naming day to know that a grown man had been plotting to kill him and then watch the man die brutally.

“This is the right and proper fate of all who swear false loyalty to the Severed Throne,” he said. “Let all who stand witness to this justice carry forth the word that all traitors to Antea will suffer and all will die.”

The applause and shouts of approval burst forth all around. Geder joined in, and Dawson Kalliam leaned close to him, shouting to be heard.

“This is yours too, Palliako.”

It was a kinder way of putting it than he’d used before the ceremony started. Then he’d said, *You’ve given Simeon a spine at last.*

The drum began again, and king and prince turned and walked out in solemn procession. Servants dressed in red came to carry out the body. Maas was to be displayed, swords still in place, for seventeen days. What was left after that would be thrown into the Division with the kitchen scraps and sewage, and anyone who tried to pull it out for a more respectful burial would be hung. Somewhere behind Geder, hidden by the nobles of Antea, the doors opened. With the king gone and the ceremony finished, conversation rose to a deafening roar. Geder couldn’t make out what anyone was saying over the noise of everyone else, so he just followed the subtle movement of the crowd and made his way out.

In the great halls of the Kingspire, the nobility of Antea broke into a hundred small groups. Dispersed, the din of the talk was less deafening if not particularly more comprehensible. He saw people pretending not to look at him, and he had some idea what they were saying: *Palliako claims he was wandering the Keshet, but he came back knowing all about the plot on Prince Aster* and *burning Vanai was all part of his plan* and *I told you his bringing loyal soldiers back just before the mercenaries tried to take the city was no coincidence.* He walked through the hall slowly, bathing in it.

“Sir Palliako. A word.”

Curtin Issandrian and Alan Klin walked up to him looking like bookends in the library of the damned. Geder smiled. Curtin Issandrian put out his hand.

“I’ve come to thank you, sir. I owe you a great debt.”

“You do?” Geder asked, leaving the man’s hand floating in the air between them.

“If it weren’t for you, I would still be in alliance with a secret traitor to the crown,” Issandrian said. “Feldin Maas was a friend, and I let that friendship blind me to his nature. Today has been a terrible day for me, but it has been necessary. And I thank you for it.”

Geder wished Basrahip had been there, just to know if Issandrian were what he pretended to be. Another time, though. There were months and years still to come when he and his Righteous Servant

could ferret out every secret in the court. A little magnanimity now wouldn't hurt anyone. He took Issandrian's hand.

"You're a good man, Geder Palliako," Issandrian said, speaking just loudly enough to be overheard. "Antea is fortunate to have you."

"Thank you, Lord Issandrian," Geder said, matching him. "It is a strong man who can admit he was misguided. I respect you for it."

They dropped hands, and Alan Klin came forward, his own hand extended. Geder grinned and took it, pulling the man close.

"Sir Klin!" he said, grinning. "It's been too long."

"It has. It truly has."

"Do you remember that night on the march to Vanai when I got drunk and burned that essay I showed you?"

"Yes. Yes, I do," Klin said, laughing as if they were sharing a nostalgic moment.

Geder laughed too, and then let the amusement drain from his face.

"So do I."

He dropped Klin's hand, turned, and walked away feeling like the ground itself was rising to meet his footsteps. Outside, the day was blue skies and chill winter wind. His father stood near the steps that led down to the carriages, watching the chaos of horses, wood, and wheels. He held a pipe in his hand, but there seemed to be no fire in it.

"So did the political process come to its logical end?" Lerer asked.

"Didn't you watch?"

"I'm too old for blood sports. If the thing needs doing, then do it, but don't make a theater piece out of it."

"But the king has to make an example, doesn't he? He's trying to keep Asterilhold from interfering with us," Geder said. He felt hurt that his father hadn't watched Maas die. "They were going to *kill* Prince Aster."

"I suppose," Lerer said. "Still. I'll be damned pleased to be home, get the stink of Camnipol off my skin. We've been away from Rivenhalm too long."

> If we are to understand the freedom of humanity, we must first understand its enslavement. The root of all races—even the Firstblood—exists in the reign of dragons, and the end of that reign must by necessity mark the beginning of a peculiarly human history. It is not an exaggeration to say that the last breath of the last dragon was the first moment of the age of humanity in all its variety. But like all freedom, it was bounded and defined by that which came before. Our knowledge of the Dragon Empire is imperfect at best, but I contend that the discovery of the cave-palaces beneath

Takynpal gives us our best view into what I have chosen to call the Age of Formation.

Geder flipped ahead, rereading pages he had translated before. The paper was brown with age, and fragile. He disliked handling it for fear that the pages would crack and flake away in his fingertips, but he needed to get as close to the original texts as he could. It seemed to him that there had to be something—some word or phrase that could have been translated in more than one way—that would mention the existence and history of the goddess.

The door of his sitting room swung open and Basrahip came in. He still wore his robes from the temple in the mountains, but he'd accepted a pair of leather-soled boots for walking on the cobbled streets of Camnipol. Among the rich red tapestries and soft upholstered chairs of the Palliako room in Camnipol, he looked entirely out of place. A desert weed in an arrangement of roses. He smiled at Geder and bowed.

"Been walking again?" Geder said.

"I knew tales of the great cities of the world, but nothing I had imagined could be so grand and so corrupt," the priest said. "A child not more than seven summers old lied to me. And for no reason."

"What did he say?"

The huge priest lumbered to a chair just across from Geder and lowered himself into it, the wood creaking under him as he spoke.

"That he could tell my future for three copper coins. He knew it was untrue. A child."

"He was a beggar," Geder said. "Of course they're trying to cheat you. They need the money for food. I think you should be careful where you walk, though. There are parts of the city that aren't safe. Especially after dark."

"You live in an age of darkness, my friend. But this city will be beautiful beyond measure when it is pure."

"Have you been to the temple?"

"I have," Basrahip said. "It is a beautiful building. I am looking forward to the day when I can make it my own."

"The paperwork shouldn't take long. Before the close of court, certainly, and that's less than a week now. But there's not much to do in Camnipol over the winter months."

"I have tasks enough."

"So I've been reading," Geder said, "and there's something bothering me."

"Yes?"

"The goddess is eternal. She was there at the birth of the dragons. She was there all through the Dragon Empire, but the only references I

see to the Righteous Servant or the Sinir Kushku come at the very end, during the final war. And then they talk about it as if Morade created it, the way Asteril made the Timzinae or Vailoth made the Drowned. I just don't understand how that can be right."

"Perhaps then it cannot," the priest said. "You should put less trust in written words, my friend. They are the stone eggs of lies. Here. I will show you. Read something from your book there."

Geder flipped the pages, fingertips shifting across the words until he found a passage that was easily rendered.

"It was the fourth century of the Dragon Vailoth's rule when these policies changed."

"Is that true?" the priest asked him. "Is it untrue? Do you mean what you say? No, old friend. It's neither. Your voice carries nothing. They are only words you repeat emptily. To write a thing down is to kill it. Only in the living voice can the truth be known. My brothers and I have listened to one another, passing the voice of the goddess down from generation to generation, and with every new speaking from the start, we have known what we heard to be true. These books you have? They are ink on paper. Objects. Soulless. You would be wiser not to put your faith in them."

"Oh," Geder said. "That's… I'd never looked at things that way. Does that—?"

"Geder?"

Lerer Palliako stood in the doorway. His tunic was the blue and gray of House Palliako, formally cut with silver buttons on the sleeve. His hand clutched the doorway, as if he needed it to keep himself steady.

"What's the matter, Father?"

"We have a visitor. You should come with me."

Geder rose to his feet, alarm tightening his skin. Basrahip looked from the doorway to Geder and back.

"Stay here," Geder said. "I'll come back as soon as I can."

Lerer walked in silence through the halls. The servants, usually buzzing through the rooms like bees in a meadow, were gone. At the door to the private meeting chamber, he stopped. For a moment, Geder thought he would speak, but instead he shook his head, opened the door, and stepped in.

The private chamber had been designed for comfort. Candles glowed from polished silver sconces, doubling their light and filling the room with the scents of honey and heat. A fire grate sat unlit and soot-blackened in its corner. Light spilled from the western window, and the pale silk chairs caught it, seeming almost to glow. A boy in a grey tunic looked up at him solemnly, and Geder felt he should have recognized the face. On the far wall, a huge painting the size of a

standing man showed a green-scaled dragon towering above figures representing the thirteen races of man. And looking up at the painting, King Simeon.

The king turned.

Lerer bowed and said, “Your Majesty.” Geder bowed a moment later, quickly and with the sense of trying to catch up. The boy was the prince. Prince Aster and King Simeon.

“I am pleased to meet you at last, Geder Palliako,” the king said. Geder took the use of his given name as permission to stand.

“I… Um, thank you. It’s a pleasure to meet you too, Majesty.”

“You are aware that tradition calls for the prince to be taken in by a house of the highest reputation and nobility. A family that will swear to protect him should the need arise.”

“Ah,” Geder said. “Yes?”

“I have come to ask you to fill this role.”

“My father, you mean? Our house?”

“It’s not me he wants,” Lerer said. “It’s you.”

“I… I don’t know how to raise a boy. All respect, Your Majesty. I wouldn’t have the first idea what to do.”

“Keep him safe,” the king said. His voice didn’t sound commanding. It didn’t sound formal. It sounded like a man on the edge of begging or prayer. “Just keep him safe.”

“Right now everyone in court loves you or fears you, my boy,” Lerer said. “Half of them are saying you’re the first hero Antea’s seen in a generation, and the other half won’t mention you for fear of drawing your attention. I’m not sure it’s a good reason to take the title of protector.”

“I’m not doing it,” Geder said. “I’m no one’s protector. It’d be you, Father. You’re the Viscount of Rivenhalm.”

“But you are the Baron of Ebbinbaugh,” King Simeon said.

“Ebbinbaugh?” Geder said.

“Someone has to take Maas’s holdings,” Lerer said. “Seems that’s you.”

“Well,” Geder said, a grin spreading across his lips. *“Well.”*

Prince Aster rose and walked to Geder. He wasn’t a large boy. Geder had always thought he was taller. He had the gray eyes and serious face of the dead queen, but his father’s jaw.

“I owe you my life, Lord Palliako,” the boy said. The cadence of his voice made the phrases sound rehearsed. “I would be pleased to have you as my protector, and swear that I should do honor to you as your ward.”

“Do you want to?” Geder asked. The boy’s formal expression faltered. Tears appeared, glistening in his eyes.

“They say I can’t stay with Da anymore,” he said.

Geder felt himself starting to tear up as well.

"I lost my mother when I was young too," he said. "Maybe I could be like an uncle? Or an older brother."

"I don't have any brothers," Aster said.

"See? Neither do I," Geder said. Aster tried to smile. "We'd probably need to visit your father a lot, though. And mine. God, am I going to have my own holding? Father, I'm going to have my own holding."

"You will," Lerer said. "I think his majesty didn't want to be the only one in the room losing a son."

Geder barely heard him. This morning, he'd been a hero. Now he had a barony of his own and a place in court that men fought and sometimes died to get. Sir Alan Klin would soil himself when he heard that he'd made an enemy of Prince Aster's protector.

"Thank you, Your Majesty. I accept this duty and honor, and I'll make sure Aster's kept safe. I swear it."

The king was weeping, tears streaking down his cheeks, but his voice didn't waver when he spoke.

"I put my trust in you, Lord Palliako. I will… I will make the announcement at the close of court. I'll see you're seated appropriately for your new station. This is a brighter day for the kingdom. And I thank you for that."

Geder bowed. He wanted to run out in the streets, capering and singing. He wanted to go brag to all of his friends, starting with Jorey Kalliam and…

"Can I borrow the prince?" Geder asked. "Just for a few minutes? There's someone I want him to meet."

In the sitting room, Basrahip had moved to Geder's chair. The huge hands turned the pages slowly, the broad face twisted with disdain. Geder cleared his throat. The priest looked up, his eyes shifting from Geder to the prince standing at his side.

"Basrahip, high priest of the goddess, may I introduce my new ward Prince Aster. Prince Aster, this is Basrahip."

The prince walked forward, stopped the appropriate distance away, and bowed his small head. He looked like a kitten greeting a bull.

"I am very pleased to meet you, sir," the prince said.

Basrahip smiled.

"No," he said, softly. "You aren't. But give it time, young prince. Give it time."

orbit

meet the author

Kyle Zimmerman

DANIEL ABRAHAM is the author of the critically acclaimed Long Price Quartet. He has been nominated for the Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy awards, and won the International Horror Guild award. He also writes as MLN Hanover and (with Ty Franck) James S. A. Corey. He lives in New Mexico. Find out more about the author at www.danielabraham.com.

The Dragon's Path ***marks the beginning of a new epic fantasy project for you. What was the impulse behind this project, and how was it different from the other books you've written?***

Actually, that's kind of a hard question. The impulse behind a project isn't something I can really describe. You know, apart from saying that it seemed nifty. But I can talk about the approach. That was very different from what I've done before.

How so?

Well, the last epic fantasy—or second world fantasy or however we want to talk about it—was my first big book, essentially. I wanted to do something different and novel, no pun intended. And I wanted to learn how to write book-length fiction. I'd done a lot of short stories, and I felt pretty comfortable with that length, but novels were a different beast.

That's interesting. We should get back to that, but tell me a little about the novelty. What do you mean by that?

I mean, I wanted to do something that people hadn't seen before. I wanted an epic fantasy without much violence. I wanted to tell a few people's stories over the span of their whole lives. I wanted to set it someplace that wasn't a medieval Europe analogue. I wanted to write something that was different. And I did, and I'm proud of it. But part of what I learned is that different is easy in a way I hadn't expected. And I started getting interested in something else. I started thinking about how to take elements that are maybe more familiar and remake them. That's not quite right. I don't mean take out hoary old tropes and shine them up. I mean, go to what makes epic fantasy epic fantasy—find the genre's strength—and really engage with it.

How did you go about that?

Well, back in 2007 I arranged a conversation. A friend of mine has a place just outside Santa Fe with a really nice living room that looks out over the desert, and she let me have kind of a party there. I called it my symposium. We had George R. R. Martin and S. M. Stirling and Walter Jon Williams and Melinda Snodgrass and a few others—a lot of the local folks—and basically we sat

around all day talking about what epic fantasy is and does. Where it gets its juice. I have something like four or five hours of recordings from that. I took what we said there and I turned it over in my head until I really understood what my opinions were. And that was the start of The Dagger and the Coin.

That sounds like a fascinating day. Was there a consensus? Did everyone there have more or less the same opinion on the subject?

Not exactly, no. But there were points that were pretty widely agreed on. Epic fantasy has a lot to do with nostalgia. There's that sense of looking back at a golden age, and a lot of the time with a sense of loss. Tolkien came up a lot. Pretty much everything since *The Lord of the Rings* has been written in imitation of or reaction against *The Lord of the Rings.* But it also has to do with how the story relates to nature, and whether the world is essentially benign.

The biggest thing that I took away from it, though, is that epic fantasy—and maybe this is true for all literature—but epic fantasy is a conversation. Without Tolkien, you don't have Terry Brooks, but you also don't have Stephen Donaldson. Without Donaldson and the rise of the antihero in fantasy, you probably don't have *A Song of Ice and Fire.* In a way, that gave me permission.

Permission for what, exactly?

Permission to react, I guess. Permission to be part of a greater body of literature than just what I'm doing right here. That sounds pretentious, doesn't it? How about this: it gave me permission to take the things I love best and use them. So, for instance, I have a real fascination with medieval banking. There's a book called *Medici Money* by Tim Parks I've read a half dozen times. So I grabbed that. And I thought about Dorothy Dunnett's House of Niccolo books and George's Ice and Fire books and all the adventure stories I grew up with. By talking about the things that unify the genre, I sort of loosened up about celebrating them. I thought about what it felt like to read David Eddings when I was fourteen, and get back to the things that would do that for me at forty. If that makes sense.

You were talking before about writing novels as being different than short fiction. You've written a lot of short stories in your career. How do they differ from the longer work?

Well, the short stories tend to be weirder than the books. They're very different forms. There are stories that just pop in thirty pages that would lay there like yesterday's fish at three hundred. I'd say I probably do more experimental, difficult-to-categorize short

stories and then use the books to apply what I learned there.

You have a long history, I understand, of working in writers' workshops. You attended Clarion West in 1998. You are a frequent participant at the Rio Hondo workshop in Taos. You were in a critique group in New Mexico for almost a decade. How much do you think that kind of experience helps writers?

For as much time as I've put in them and as much benefit as I've gotten from them, I'm actually still a little leery about them. If you get a good one, it's invaluable. I have no doubt at all that I came out of Clarion West and Rio Hondo and the local crit group better than when I went in. But there's the ones you didn't talk about too. I took a bunch of creative writing classes in college that I don't think did much. I was in a couple groups before that weren't much use, and were really probably counterproductive. A workshop depends on the people in it. Good people are great. Lousy people are perhaps less great, right?

introducing

If you enjoyed
THE DRAGON'S PATH,
look out for

THE KING'S BLOOD

Book Two of The Dagger and the Coin
by Daniel Abraham

CAPTAIN MARCUS WESTER

Sometime, centuries before, someone had built a low wall along the top of the rise. In the moonlight, the scattered rocks reminded Marcus of knucklebones. He knelt, one hand on the dew-slick grass. In the cove below him, three ships rested at anchor. Shallow-bottomed with paired masts. Faster and more maneuverable than the round-bellied trade ships that they hunted. One showed a mark on the side where she'd been struck not too many weeks before, the new timber of the patch bright and unweathered.

On the sand, a cookfire still burned, its orange glow the only warmth in the early autumn night. From where they stood, Marcus counted a dozen structures—more than tents, less than huts—scattered just above the tide line. A well-established camp, then. That was good. A half dozen stretched-leather boats rested near the water.

Yardem Hane grunted softly and pointed a wide hand to the east. A tree a hundred feet or so from the water towered up toward the sky. A glimmer, moonlight on metal, less than a third of the way to its tip showed where the sentry perched. Marcus pointed out at the ships. High in the rigging of the one nearest the shore, another dark figure.

Yardem held up two fingers, wide brows rising in question. *Two watchers?*

Marcus shook his head, holding up a third finger. *One more.*

The pair sat still in the shadows made darker by the spray of fallen stone. The moon shifted slowly in its arc. The movement was subtle. A single branch on the distant tree that moved in the breeze more slowly. Marcus pointed. Yardem flicked an ear silently; he wore no earrings when they were scouting. Marcus looked over the cove one last time, cataloging it as best he could. They faded back down the rise, into the shadows. They walked north, and then west. They didn't speak until they'd traveled twice as far as their low voices would carry.

"How many do you make out?" Marcus asked.

Yardem spat thoughtfully.

"Not more than seventy, sir," he said.

"That's my count too."

The path was hardly more than a deer trail. Thin spaces in the trees. It wouldn't be many weeks before the freshly dried leaves of autumn fell, but tonight their steps were muffled by well-rotted litter and a summer's soft moss. The moon was no more than a scattering of pale dapples in the darkness under the leaves.

"We could go back to Porte Oliva," Yardem said. "Raise a hundred men. Maybe a ship."

"That's possible."

In the brush, a small animal skittered, fleeing before them as if they were a fire.

"The one farthest from shore was riding lower than the others," Marcus said.

"Was."

"We come in with a ship, they'll see us. It'll be empty water by the time we're there."

Yardem was quiet apart from a small grunt when his head bumped against a low branch. Marcus kept his eyes on the darkness, not really seeing. His legs shifted and moved easily. His mind gnawed at the puzzle.

"If they see us coming on land," he said, "they haul out boats and wave to us from the sea. We trap them on land in a fair fight with the men we have now, they have numbers and territory on us. We wait to get more sword-and-bows, and they may have moved on."

"Difficult, sir."

"Ideas?"

"Hire on for an honest war."

Marcus chuckled.

His soldiers were camped dark, but the sound of their voices and the smells of their food traveled in the darkeness. He had fifty men of several races—otter-pelted Kurtadae, black-chitined Timzinae, Firstblood. Even half a dozen bronze-scaled Jasuru hired on at the last minute when their contract as house guards fell through. It made for more tension in the camp, but the usual racial slurs were absent. They were Kurtadae and Timzinae and Jasuru, not *clickers* and *roaches* and *pennies.* And no one said a bad word about the Firstblood when one of them would decide who dug the latrines.

And, to the point, the mixture gave Marcus options.

Ahariel Akkabrian had been one of the first guards when the Porte Oliva branch of the Medean bank had been a high-stakes gamble with all odds against. His pelt was half a shade greyer now, especially around his mouth and back, but the beads woven into it were silver instead of glass. He sat up on his cot as Marcus ducked into the tent.

His eyes were bleary with sleep, but his voice was crisp.

"Captain Wester, sir. Yardem."

"Sorry to wake you," Yardem said.

"Ahariel," Marcus said. "How long could you swim in the sea?"

"Me, you mean, sir? Or someone like me?"

"Kurtadae."

"Long as you'd like."

"No boasting. It's past summer. The water's cold. How long?"

Ahariel yawned deeply and shook his head, setting the beads to clicking.

"The dragons built us for water, Captain. The only people who can swim longer and colder than we can are the Drowned, and they can't fight for shit."

Marcus closed his eyes, seeing the moonlit cove again. The ships at anchor, the shelters, the hide boats. The coals of the fire glowing. He had eleven Kurtadae, Ahariel included. If he sent them into the water, that left a bit over thirty left. Against twice that number. Marcus bit his lip and looked up at his second in command. In the light of the single candle, Yardem looked placid. Marcus cleared his throat.

"The day you throw me in a ditch and take control of the company?"

"Not today, sir," Yardem said.

"Afraid you'd say that. Only one thing to do then. Ahariel? You're going to need some knives."

Marcus rode to the west, shield slung on his back and sword at his side. The sun rose behind him, pushing his shadow out ahead like a gigantic version of himself. To his left, the sea was bright as beaten gold. The sentry tree was just in sight. The poor bastard on duty would be squinting into the brightness. The danger, of course, being that he wouldn't look at all. If Marcus managed an actual surprise attack, they were doomed. He had the uncomfortable sense that God's sense of humor went along lines very much like that.

"Spread out," he called back down the line. "Broken file. We want to look bigger than we are."

The call came back, voice after voice repeating the call. Timing was going to matter a great deal. The land looked different in the sunlight. The cove wasn't as distant as it had seemed in the night. Marcus sat high in his saddle.

"Come on," he murmured. "See us. Look over here and see us. We're right *here.*"

A shiver along a wide branch. The leaves bent back light brighter than gold. A horn blared.

"That was it," Yardem rumbled.

“Was,” Marcus said. He pictured the little shelters, the sailors scuttling for their belongings, for their boats. He counted ten silent breaths then pulled his shield to the front and drew his sword.

“Sound the charge,” he said. “Let’s get this done.”

When they rounded the bend that led into the cove, a ragged volley of arrows met them. Marcus shouted, and his soldiers picked up the call. From the far end of the strip of sand, ten archers stood ground, loosing arrows and preparing to jump into the last hide boat and take to the safety of the water, the ships, and the sea. The other boats were already away, rowing fast toward the ships and loaded with enough men to defeat Marcus’s force.

The first was a dozen yards from shore and already sinking.

In the bright water, hidden by the glare of the sun, nearly a dozen Kurtadae with long knives put new holes in the boats.

Marcus pulled up, waving to his own archers to take the shoreline while the Jasuru charged the enemy and their boat, howling like mad animals. A few figures appeared on the ships, staring out at the spectacle on shore and in the tidepool. The first boat vanished. The second was staying more nearly afloat as the men in it bailed frantically with helmets and hands. They weren’t rowing, though. It wouldn’t get them any farther.

Marcus lifted his hand and his archers raised bows.

“Surrender now and you won’t be harmed!” he shouted over the surf. “Or flee and be killed. Your choice.”

In the surf, one of the sailors started kicking for the ships. Marcus pointed at him with his sword. It took three volleys before he stopped. As if on cue, the black bobbing heads of Ahariel and the other Kurtadae appeared in a rough line between the sinking boats and the ships. As Marcus watched, the swimming Kurtadae lifted their knives above the water, like the ocean growing teeth.

“Leave your weapons in the water,” Marcus called. “Let’s end this gently.”

They emerged from the waves, sullen and bedraggled. Marcus’s soldiers took them one by one, bound them, and left them sitting under guard.

“Fifty-eight,” Yardem said.

“There’s a few still on the ships,” Marcus said. “And there’s the one we poked full of arrows.”

“Fifty-nine, then.”

“Still outnumbered. Badly outnumbered,” Marcus said. And then, “We can exaggerate when we take it to the taphouse.”

A young Firstblood man walked out of the sea. His beard was braided in the style of Carbal. His eyes were bright green, his face thin and sharp. His silk robe clung to his body, making his potbelly

impossible to hide. Marcus kicked his horse and trotted up to him. He looked like a kitten that fell in a creek.

"Macero Rinál?"

The pirate captain looked up at Marcus with contempt that was as good as acknowledgment.

"I've been looking for you," Marcus said.

The man said something obscene.

Marcus had his tent set up at the top of the rise. The stretched leather clung to the frames and kept the wind out, if not the flies. Macero Rinál sat on a cushion wrapped in a wool blanket and stinking of brine. Marcus sat at his field desk with a plate of sausage and bread. Below them, as if on a stage, Marcus's forces were involved with the long process of unloading the surrendered ship, hauling the cargo to land, and loading it onto wagons.

"You picked the wrong ship," Marcus said.

"You picked the wrong man," Rinál said. He had a smaller voice than Marcus had expected.

"Five weeks ago, a ship called the *Stormcrow* was coming west from Maccia in the Free Cities heading for Porte Oliva in Birancour. It didn't make it. Waylaid, the captain said. Is this sounding familiar?"

"I am the cousin of Prince Esteban of Carbal. You and your magistrates have no power over me," Rinál said, lifting his chin as he spoke. "I invoke the Treaty of Carcedon."

Marcus took a bite of sausage and chewed slowly. When he spoke, he drew the syllables out.

"Captain Rinál? Look at me. Do I seem like a magistrate's blade?"

The chin didn't descend, but a flicker of uncertainty came to the young man's eyes.

"I work for the Medean bank in Porte Oliva. My employers insured the *Stormcrow*. When you took the crates off that ship, you weren't stealing from the sailors who were carrying them. You weren't even stealing from the merchants who owned them. You were stealing from us."

The pirate's face went grey. The leather flap opened with a rustle and Yardem came in. His earrings were back in place.

"News?" Marcus said.

"The cargo here matches the manifests," Yardem said. He was scowling, playing to the dangerous reputation of the Tralgu. Marcus assumed it amused him. "We're in the right place, sir."

"Carry on."

Yardem nodded and left. Marcus took another bite of sausage.

"My cousin," Rinál said. "King Sephan—"

"My name's Marcus Wester."

Rinál's eyes grew wide and he sank back on the cushion.

“You’ve heard of me,” Marcus said. “So you know that the appeal-to-noble-blood strategy may not be your best choice. Your mother was a minor priestess who got drunk with a monarch’s exiled uncle. That’s your protection. Me? I’ve killed kings.”

“Kings?”

“Well, just the one, but you take the point.”

Rinál tried to speak, swallowed to loosen his throat, and then tried again.

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to reclaim our property, or as much of it as you have left. I don’t expect it’ll make up the losses, but it’s a beginning.”

“What are you going to do with me?”

“You mean if I don’t take you to justice? I’m going to come to an understanding with you.”

A cry rose up from the beach below them. Dozens of voices raised in alarm. Marcus nodded to the captive, and together they walked out into the light. On the bright water below them, the ship farthest from the shore was afire. A plume of white smoke rose from it, and thin red snake-tongues licked at the mast, visible even from here. Rinál cried out, and as if in answer a roll of sudden black smoke bellied out from the flame.

“Don’t worry,” Marcus said. “We’re only burning one of them.”

“I’ll see you dead,” Rinál said, but there was no power in his voice. Marcus put a hand on the man’s shoulder and steered him back into the shade of the tent.

“If I kill you or if I burn all your ships,” Marcus said, “then by this time next year, there’s just going to be another bunch like yours in the cove. The bank’s investments are just as much at risk. Nothing changes, and I have to come back here and have this same talk with someone else.”

“You’ve burned her. You burned my ship.”

“Try to stay with me,” Marcus said, lowering Rinál back to the ground. The pirate put his head in his hands. Marcus took the two steps to his field desk and took out the paper Cithrin had prepared for him. He’d meant to drop it haughtily at the pirate’s feet, but the man seemed so shaken he tucked it into his lap instead.

“That’s a list of the ships we insure out of Porte Oliva. If I have to find you again, offering yourself to the magistrate is the best thing that could happen.”

The breeze shifted and the smell of burning pitch filled the tent and spoiled the taste of the sausages. The leather walls chuffed like tiny sails. Rinál opened the papers.

“If the ship’s not listed here…”

“Then it’s no business of mine.”

“I’m not the only ships on these waters,” he said. “If someone else…”

“You should discourage them.”

The color was starting to come back to Rinál’s cheeks. The shock had begun to fade and the old righteousness return, but it was tempered now. The voices coming up from the water were brighter now, laughing. Those would be Marcus’s soldiers. A wagon creaked. It was time to move on.

“You’ll travel with us as far as Cemmis township,” Marcus said. “That’s not too far to walk back from before your people get sick from thirst.”

“You think you’re such a big man, no one can take you down,” the pirate said. “You think you’re better than me. You’re no different.”

Marcus leaned against the field desk, looking down at the pirate. In truth, Rinál was a young man. For all his bluster and taking on airs, he was the same sort who tripped drunk men in taprooms and groped women in the street. He was a badly behaved child who, instead of growing to manhood, found a few ships and took his bullying out in the world where it could turn him a profit.

A dozen replies came to Marcus. *When you’ve watched your family die, say that again* and *Grow up, boy, while you still have the chance* and *Yes, I’m better than you; my ship isn’t burning.*

“We’ll leave soon,” he said. “I have guards posted. Don’t try to go without us.”

Outside, the little two-masted ship roared in flame. Black smoke billowed from her, carrying sparks and embers up to wheeling birds. Marcus walked down the rise to where the carts were lining up, prepared to head back home. One of his younger Kurtadae was in the medical wagon, his arm being shaved and bound. Beneath the pelt, his skin looked just like a Firstblood’s.

Three of the enemy sailors were laid out under tarps. The rest, bound in ranks with arms bent back, were sullen and angry. Marcus’s men were grinning and trading jokes. It was like the aftermath of a battle, only this time there’d hardly been any bloodshed. The wet sand was smooth and even where the waves washed their footprints away. The mules, ignoring the smell of flames and the banter of soldiers, pulled wagons filled with silks and worked brass back toward the road. The smells of salt and smoke mixed.

Marcus felt the first tug of darkness at the back of his mind. The aftermath of any fight—great battle or taproom dance—always had that touch of bleakness. The brightness and immediacy of the fight gave way, and the world and all its history poured back in. It was worse when he lost, but even in victory, the darkness was there. He put it aside. There was real work to be done.

Yardem stood by the head wagon, a Cinnae boy on a lathered horse at his side. A messenger. As he approached, the boy dropped down and led his mount away to be cared for.

“Where do we stand?” Marcus asked.

“Ready to start back, sir. But might be best if I led the column. The magistra wants you back at the house as soon as you can get there.”

“What’s happened?”

Yardem shrugged eloquently.

“An honest war,” he said.

Entr’acte

The Apostate

The apostate groaned, rolling over on his thin mattress. The first bare light of dawn outlined the stable door, and in his blood, the spiders shuddered and danced, agitated as they had been for weeks now. In the twenty years he had traveled the world, the taint in his blood had never troubled him as much as these last weeks. Around him, the others still slept, their deep and regular breath reassuring as a thick wool blanket. The stables were warm, or warmer at least than sleeping in the cart would have been. He wouldn't have to break a skin of ice off the water bucket before he drank. When he sat up, his spine ached. Maybe from the coming winter, maybe from the years weighing down his shoulders, maybe from the restlessness of the creatures that lived in his skin.

One of the horses snorted in its stall, shifting uneasily. From the shadows, there was a tiny gasp. He went still, straining to hear.

"I won't finish," a familiar voice whispered. "I swear I won't finish."

The apostate closed his eyes. It never changed. All through the world, likely all through the ages and epochs of humanity, some things simply never changed. He swallowed, readying his voice. When he spoke, the words carried through the stables and out into the yard.

"Sandr! If you get that girl pregnant, I will be sorely tempted to tie off your cock with a length of wire, and I swear it will not improve your performance."

The voice that had gasped squeaked in alarm, and Sandr rushed into the dim light, pulling at his tunic to cover himself.

"There's no one here, Master Kit," the boy lied. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Which performance do you mean?" Smit asked in a sleepy voice. "Seems to me that if you're talking about stagecraft, tying yourself down might be a decent exercise in concentration."

"Help him play a hunchback," Cary said through a yawn.

"There's no one here," Sandr said again. "You're all imagining things."

The scrape of a board at the stable's back marked the girl's escape, whoever she was. The apostate rose to sitting. Hornet lit a lantern, the warm light chasing away the darkness. With groans and complaints, the company came to life. As they always did. Charlit Soon, the new actress, was looking daggers at Sandr. Yet another irritation the apostate would have to soothe. He wondered, and not for the first time, how anyone without the spiders could keep an acting company

together for any length of time. But perhaps they couldn't.

"Up," he said. "I'm sure there's work to be done that will make us more money than lying here in the dark. Up, you mad, beautiful bastards, and let us once more take the hearts and dreams of Porte Oliva by storm."

"Yes, Mother," Cary said, rolled over, and fell back to sleep.

The first time he'd met Marcus Wester, the apostate had given him a private name: the man without hopes. In the last year, the despair had faded a bit, but sometimes Wester would still make his little jokes—*I'm too stubborn to die* or *You don't need love when there's laundry to wash*—and the people around him would chuckle. Only the apostate knew how deeply the man meant what he said.

It was what made the mercenary captain interesting.

The taproom near the bank had the advantage in these cold months of keeping food and a warm fire. Cary and Charlit Soon would set up in the common room some nights, singing songs from the lighter comic operas and making between them enough to feed the whole company for three days.

"Always best to keep your political assassinations discreet," Wester said. "Really, that was where I went wrong. Well, it's not the first place I went wrong."

"One of the places, sir," Yardem Hane said.

"Will it keep Northcoast from violence, do you think?"

"They poisoned a man so he'd vomit himself to death," Marcus said. "That's violence. But with his claim disposed, I don't see any swords taking the field, no. So that's good for the Narinisle trade. And apparently Antea's decided not to descend into civil war either."

"I didn't know they were on the dragon's path," the apostate said, taking a sip of his ale. During winter, they kept it in the alley under guard, so it was as cold as the rooms were warm.

"Didn't either. This new notary gets reports from everyplace, though. It's one of the advantages of being part of a bank where the bank people know about you. Anyway, it seems the only thing that kept the court in Camnipol from turning on each other like a pack of starving dogs was a religious zealot from the Keshet."

"Really?"

"Well," Wester said, "he's a real Antean noble, but apparently he spent time in the Keshet and came back with a bad case of the faith. Exposed some sort of plot, turned the court on its ears, and built a temple just down the street from the Kingspire to celebrate."

"There's nothing sinister about building temples, sir," Yardem said. "People do it all the time."

“Not in celebration,” Wester said. “People go to God when they’ve got trouble. Things are well, there’s not much point sucking after the divine.”

Yardem flicked a jingling ear and leaned toward the apostate.

“He says these things to annoy me.”

“Always works.”

“It does, sir,” the Tralgu lied.

“And the Goddess of Round Pies seems especially dim.”

“Round pies?” the apostate asked.

“The cult’s got a symbol. Big red banner with a white bit in the middle, and what looks like eight bits of pie all stuck together.”

“Eight points on a compass,” Yardem said.

No, the apostate thought, dread pouring into him like dark water. *No, the eight legs of a spider.*

“You all right, Kit?” Wester asked. “You’re looking pale.”

“Fine,” the apostate said. “Just fine.”

But in his mind there was a single thought:

It’s begun.

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Any errors and infelicities are entirely my own.

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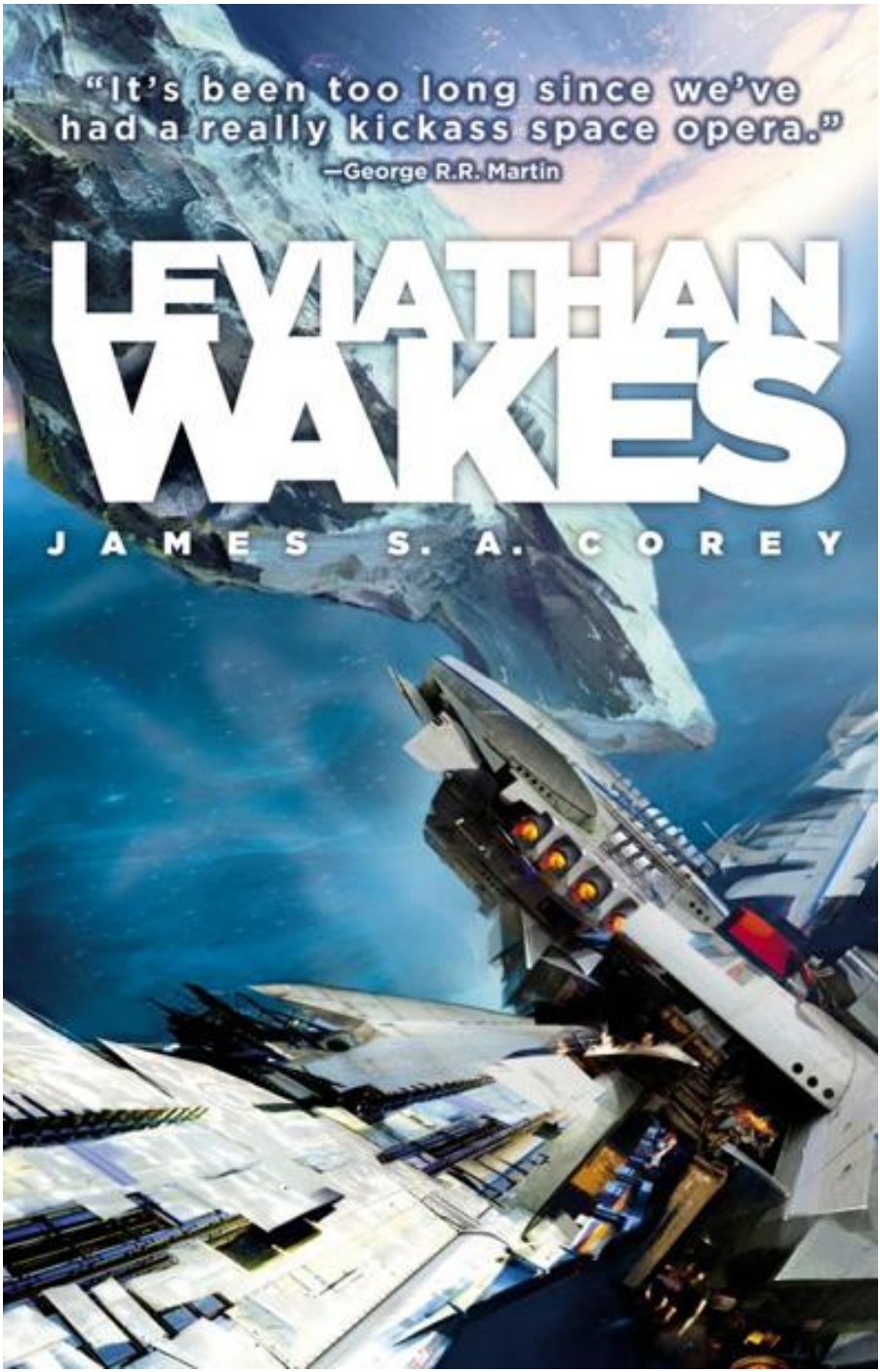
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For Jayne and Kat, who encourage me to daydream about spaceships

Prologue: Julie

The *Scopuli* had been taken eight days ago, and Julie Mao was finally ready to be shot.

It had taken all eight days trapped in a storage locker for her to get to that point. For the first two she'd remained motionless, sure that the armored men who'd put her there had been serious. For the first hours, the ship she'd been taken aboard wasn't under thrust, so she floated in the locker, using gentle touches to keep herself from bumping into the walls or the atmosphere suit she shared the space with. When the ship began to move, thrust giving her weight, she'd stood silently until her legs cramped, then sat down slowly into a fetal position. She'd peed in her jumpsuit, not caring about the warm itchy wetness, or the smell, worrying only that she might slip and fall in the wet spot it left on the floor. She couldn't make noise. They'd shoot her.

On the third day, thirst had forced her into action. The noise of the ship was all around her. The faint subsonic rumble of the reactor and drive. The constant hiss and thud of hydraulics and steel bolts as the pressure doors between decks opened and closed. The clump of heavy boots walking on metal decking. She waited until all the noise she could hear sounded distant, then pulled the environment suit off its hooks and onto the locker floor. Listening for any approaching sound, she slowly disassembled the suit and took out the water supply. It was old and stale; the suit obviously hadn't been used or serviced in ages. But she hadn't had a sip in two days, and the warm loamy water in the suit's reservoir bag was the best thing she had ever tasted. She had to work hard not to gulp it down and make herself vomit.

When the urge to urinate returned, she pulled the catheter bag out of the suit and relieved herself into it. She sat on the floor, now cushioned by the padded suit and almost comfortable, and wondered who her captors were—Coalition Navy, pirates, something worse. Sometimes she slept.

On day four, isolation, hunger, boredom, and the diminishing number of places to store her piss finally pushed her to make contact with them. She'd heard muffled cries of pain. Somewhere nearby, her

shipmates were being beaten or tortured. If she got the attention of the kidnappers, maybe they would just take her to the others. That was okay. Beatings, she could handle. It seemed like a small price to pay if it meant seeing people again.

The locker sat beside the inner airlock door. During flight, that usually wasn't a high-traffic area, though she didn't know anything about the layout of this particular ship. She thought about what to say, how to present herself. When she finally heard someone moving toward her, she just tried to yell that she wanted out. The dry rasp that came out of her throat surprised her. She swallowed, working her tongue to try to create some saliva, and tried again. Another faint rattle in the throat.

The people were right outside her locker door. A voice was talking quietly. Julie had pulled back a fist to bang on the door when she heard what it was saying.

No. Please no. Please don't.

Dave. Her ship's mechanic. Dave, who collected clips from old cartoons and knew a million jokes, begging in a small broken voice.

No, please no, please don't, he said.

Hydraulics and locking bolts clicked as the inner airlock door opened. A meaty thud as something was thrown inside. Another click as the airlock closed. A hiss of evacuating air.

When the airlock cycle had finished, the people outside her door walked away. She didn't bang to get their attention.

They'd scrubbed the ship. Detainment by the inner planets navies was a bad scenario, but they'd all trained on how to deal with it. Sensitive OPA data was scrubbed and overwritten with innocuous-looking logs with false time stamps. Anything too sensitive to trust to a computer, the captain destroyed. When the attackers came aboard, they could play innocent.

It hadn't mattered.

There weren't the questions about cargo or permits. The invaders had come in like they owned the place, and Captain Darren had rolled over like a dog. Everyone else—Mike, Dave, Wan Li—they'd all just thrown up their hands and gone along quietly. The pirates or slavers or whatever they were had dragged them off the little transport ship that had been her home, and down a docking tube without even minimal environment suits. The tube's thin layer of Mylar was the

only thing between them and hard nothing: hope it didn't rip; goodbye lungs if it did.

Julie had gone along too, but then the bastards had tried to lay their hands on her, strip her clothes off.

Five years of low-gravity jui jitsu training and them in a confined space with no gravity. She'd done a lot of damage. She'd almost started to think she might win when from nowhere a gauntleted fist smashed into her face. Things got fuzzy after that. Then the locker, and *Shoot her if she makes a noise.* Four days of not making noise while they beat her friends down below and then threw one of them out an airlock.

After six days, everything went quiet.

Shifting between bouts of consciousness and fragmented dreams, she was only vaguely aware as the sounds of walking, talking, and pressure doors and the subsonic rumble of the reactor and the drive faded away a little at a time. When the drive stopped, so did gravity, and Julie woke from a dream of racing her old pinnace to find herself floating while her muscles screamed in protest and then slowly relaxed.

She pulled herself to the door and pressed her ear to the cold metal. Panic shot through her until she caught the quiet sound of the air recyclers. The ship still had power and air, but the drive wasn't on and no one was opening a door or walking or talking. Maybe it was a crew meeting. Or a party on another deck. Or everyone was in engineering, fixing a serious problem.

She spent a day listening and waiting.

By day seven, her last sip of water was gone. No one on the ship had moved within range of her hearing for twenty-four hours. She sucked on a plastic tab she'd ripped off the environment suit until she worked up some saliva; then she started yelling. She yelled herself hoarse.

No one came.

By day eight, she was ready to be shot. She'd been out of water for two days, and her waste bag had been full for four. She put her shoulders against the back wall of the locker and planted her hands against the side walls. Then she kicked out with both legs as hard as she could. The cramps that followed the first kick almost made her pass out. She screamed instead.

Stupid girl, she told herself. She was dehydrated. Eight days without activity was more than enough to start atrophy. At least she should have stretched out.

She massaged her stiff muscles until the knots were gone, then stretched, focusing her mind like she was back in dojo. When she was in control of her body, she kicked again. And again. And again, until

light started to show through the edges of the locker. And again, until the door was so bent that the three hinges and the locking bolt were the only points of contact between it and the frame.

And one last time, so that it bent far enough that the bolt was no longer seated in the hasp and the door swung free.

Julie shot from the locker, hands half raised and ready to look either threatening or terrified, depending on which seemed more useful.

There was no one on the whole deck level: the airlock, the suit storage room where she'd spent the last eight days, a half dozen other storage rooms. All empty. She plucked a magnetized pipe wrench of suitable size for skull cracking out of an EVA kit, then went down the crew ladder to the deck below.

And then the one below that, and then the one below that. Personnel cabins in crisp, almost military order. Commissary, where there were signs of a struggle. Medical bay, empty. Torpedo bay. No one. The comm station was unmanned, powered down, and locked. The few sensor logs that still streamed showed no sign of the *Scopuli*. A new dread knotted her gut. Deck after deck and room after room empty of life. Something had happened. A radiation leak. Poison in the air. Something that had forced an evacuation. She wondered if she'd be able to fly the ship by herself.

But if they'd evacuated, she'd have heard them going out the airlock, wouldn't she?

She reached the final deck hatch, the one that led into engineering, and stopped when the hatch didn't open automatically. A red light on the lock panel showed that the room had been sealed from the inside. She thought again about radiation and major failures. But if either of those was the case, why lock the door from the inside? And she had passed wall panel after wall panel. None of them had been flashing warnings of any kind. No, not radiation, something else.

There was more disruption here. Blood. Tools and containers in disarray. Whatever had happened, it had happened here. No, it had started here. And it had eneded behind that locked door.

It took two hours with a torch and prying tools from the machine shop to cut through the hatch to engineering. With the hydraulics compromised, she had to crank it open by hand. A gust of warm wet air blew out, carrying a hospital scent without the antiseptic. A coppery, nauseating smell. The torture chamber, then. Her friends would be inside, beaten or cut to pieces. Julie hefted her wrench and prepared to bust open at least one head before they killed her. She floated down.

The engineering deck was huge, vaulted like a cathedral. The fusion reactor dominated the central space. Something was wrong with it.

Where she expected to see readouts, shielding, and monitors, a layer of something like mud seemed to flow over the reactor core. Slowly, Julie floated toward it, one hand still on the ladder. The strange smell became overpowering.

The mud caked around the reactor had structure to it like nothing she'd seen before. Tubes ran through it like veins or airways. Parts of it pulsed. Not mud, then.

Flesh.

An outcropping of the thing shifted toward her. Compared to the whole, it seemed no larger than a toe, a little finger. It was Captain Darren's head.

"Help me," it said.

Chapter One: Holden

A hundred and fifty years before, when the parochial disagreements between Earth and Mars had been on the verge of war, the Belt had been a far horizon of tremendous mineral wealth beyond viable economic reach, and the outer planets had been beyond even the most unrealistic corporate dream. Then Solomon Epstein had built his little modified fusion drive, popped it on the back of his three-man yacht, and turned it on. With a good scope, you could still see his ship going at a marginal percentage of the speed of light, heading out into the big empty. The best, longest funeral in the history of mankind. Fortunately, he'd left the plans on his home computer. The Epstein Drive hadn't given humanity the stars, but it had delivered the planets.

Three-quarters of a kilometer long, a quarter of a kilometer wide—roughly shaped like a fire hydrant—and mostly empty space inside, the *Canterbury* was a retooled colony transport. Once, it had been packed with people, supplies, schematics, machines, environment bubbles, and hope. Just under twenty million people lived on the moons of Saturn now. The *Canterbury* had hauled nearly a million of their ancestors there. Forty-five million on the moons of Jupiter. One moon of Uranus sported five thousand, the farthest outpost of human civilization, at least until the Mormons finished their generation ship and headed for the stars and freedom from procreation restrictions.

And then there was the Belt.

If you asked OPA recruiters when they were drunk and feeling expansive, they might say there were a hundred million in the Belt. Ask an inner planet census taker, it was nearer to fifty million. Any way you looked, the population was huge and needed a lot of water.

So now the *Canterbury* and her dozens of sister ships in the Pur'n'Kleen Water Company made the loop from Saturn's generous rings to the Belt and back hauling glaciers, and would until the ships aged into salvage wrecks.

Jim Holden saw some poetry in that.

"Holden?"

He turned back to the hangar deck. Chief Engineer Naomi Nagata towered over him. She stood almost two full meters tall, her mop of curly hair tied back into a black tail, her expression halfway between amusement and annoyance. She had the Belter habit of shrugging with her hands instead of her shoulders.

"Holden, are you listening, or just staring out the window?"

"There was a problem," Holden said. "And because you're really,

really good, you can fix it even though you don't have enough money or supplies."

Naomi laughed.

"So you weren't listening," she said.

"Not really, no."

"Well, you got the basics right anyhow. *Knight*'s landing gear isn't going to be good in atmosphere until I can get the seals replaced. That going to be a problem?"

"I'll ask the old man," Holden said. "But when's the last time we used the shuttle in atmosphere?"

"Never, but regs say we need at least one atmo-capable shuttle."

"Hey, Boss!" Amos Burton, Naomi's earthborn assistant, yelled from across the bay. He waved one meaty arm in their general direction. He meant Naomi. Amos might be on Captain McDowell's ship; Holden might be executive officer; but in Amos Burton's world, only Naomi was boss.

"What's the matter?" Naomi shouted back.

"Bad cable. Can you hold this little fucker in place while I get the spare?"

Naomi looked at Holden, *Are we done here?* in her eyes. He snapped a sarcastic salute and she snorted, shaking her head as she walked away, her frame long and thin in her greasy coveralls.

Seven years in Earth's navy, five years working in space with civilians, and he'd never gotten used to the long, thin, improbable bones of Belters. A childhood spent in gravity shaped the way he saw things forever.

At the central lift, Holden held his finger briefly over the button for the navigation deck, tempted by the prospect of Ade Tukunbo—her smile, her voice, the patchouli-and-vanilla scent she used in her hair—but pressed the button for the infirmary instead. Duty before pleasure.

Shed Garvey, the medical tech, was hunched over his lab table, debriding the stump of Cameron Paj's left arm, when Holden walked in. A month earlier, Paj had gotten his elbow pinned by a thirty-ton block of ice moving at five millimeters a second. It wasn't an uncommon injury among people with the dangerous job of cutting and moving zero-g icebergs, and Paj was taking the whole thing with the fatalism of a professional. Holden leaned over Shed's shoulder to watch as the tech plucked one of the medical maggots out of dead tissue.

"What's the word?" Holden asked.

"It's looking pretty good, sir," Paj said. "I've still got a few nerves. Shed's been tellin' me about how the prosthetic is gonna hook up to it."

"Assuming we can keep the necrosis under control," the medic said,

“and make sure Paj doesn’t heal up too much before we get to Ceres. I checked the policy, and Paj here’s been signed on long enough to get one with force feedback, pressure and temperature sensors, fine-motor software. The whole package. It’ll be almost as good as the real thing. The inner planets have a new biogel that regrows the limb, but that isn’t covered in our medical plan.”

“Fuck the Inners, and fuck their magic Jell-O. I’d rather have a good Belter-built fake than anything those bastards grow in a lab. Just wearing their fancy arm probably turns you into an asshole,” Paj said. Then he added, “Oh, uh, no offense, XO.”

“None taken. Just glad we’re going to get you fixed up,” Holden said.

“Tell him the other bit,” Paj said with a wicked grin. Shed blushed.

“I’ve, ah, heard from other guys who’ve gotten them,” Shed said, not meeting Holden’s eyes. “Apparently there’s a period while you’re still building identification with the prosthetic when whacking off feels just like getting a hand job.”

Holden let the comment hang in the air for a second while Shed’s ears turned crimson.

“Good to know,” Holden said. “And the necrosis?”

“There’s some infection,” Shed said. “The maggots are keeping it under control, and the inflammation’s actually a good thing in this context, so we’re not fighting too hard unless it starts to spread.”

“Is he going to be ready for the next run?” Holden asked.

For the first time, Paj frowned.

“Shit yes, I’ll be ready. I’m always ready. This is what I *do,* sir.”

“Probably,” Shed said. “Depending on how the bond takes. If not this one, the one after.”

“Fuck that,” Paj said. “I can buck ice one-handed better than half the skags you’ve got on this bitch.”

“Again,” Holden said, suppressing a grin, “good to know. Carry on.”

Paj snorted. Shed plucked another maggot free. Holden went back to the lift, and this time he didn’t hesitate.

The navigation station of the *Canterbury* didn’t dress to impress. The great wall-sized displays Holden had imagined when he’d first volunteered for the navy did exist on capital ships but, even there, more as an artifact of design than need. Ade sat at a pair of screens only slightly larger than a hand terminal, graphs of the efficiency and output of the *Canterbury*’s reactor and engine updating in the corners, raw logs spooling on the right as the systems reported in. She wore thick headphones that covered her ears, the faint thump of the bass line barely escaping. If the *Canterbury* sensed an anomaly, it would alert her. If a system errored, it would alert her. If Captain McDowell left the command and control deck, it would alert her so she could

turn the music off and look busy when he arrived. Her petty hedonism was only one of a thousand things that made Ade attractive to Holden. He walked up behind her, pulled the headphones gently away from her ears, and said, “Hey.”

Ade smiled, tapped her screen, and dropped the headphones to rest around her long slim neck like technical jewelry.

“Executive Officer James Holden,” she said with an exaggerated formality made even more acute by her thick Nigerian accent. “And what can I do for you?”

“You know, it’s funny you should ask that,” he said. “I was just thinking how pleasant it would be to have someone come back to my cabin when third shift takes over. Have a little romantic dinner of the same crap they’re serving in the galley. Listen to some music.”

“Drink a little wine,” she said. “Break a little protocol. Pretty to think about, but I’m not up for sex tonight.”

“I wasn’t talking about sex. A little food. Conversation.”

“I was talking about sex,” she said.

Holden knelt beside her chair. In the one-third g of their current thrust, it was perfectly comfortable. Ade’s smile softened. The log spool chimed; she glanced at it, tapped a release, and turned back to him.

“Ade, I like you. I mean, I really enjoy your company,” he said. “I don’t understand why we can’t spend some time together with our clothes on.”

“Holden. Sweetie. Stop it, okay?”

“Stop what?”

“Stop trying to turn me into your girlfriend. You’re a nice guy. You’ve got a cute butt, and you’re fun in the sack. Doesn’t mean we’re engaged.”

Holden rocked back on his heels, feeling himself frown.

“Ade. For this to work for me, it needs to be more than that.”

“But it isn’t,” she said, taking his hand. “It’s okay that it isn’t. You’re the XO here, and I’m a short-timer. Another run, maybe two, and I’m gone.”

“I’m not chained to this ship either.”

Her laughter was equal parts warmth and disbelief.

“How long have you been on the *Cant*?”

“Five years.”

“You’re not going anyplace,” she said. “You’re comfortable here.”

“Comfortable?” he said. “The *Cant*’s a century-old ice hauler. You can find a shittier flying job, but you have to try really hard. Everyone here is either wildly under-qualified or seriously screwed things up at their last gig.”

“And you’re comfortable here.” Her eyes were less kind now. She bit

her lip, looked down at the screen, looked up.

"I didn't deserve that," he said.

"You didn't," she agreed. "Look, I told you I wasn't in the mood tonight. I'm feeling cranky. I need a good night's sleep. I'll be nicer tomorrow."

"Promise?"

"I'll even make you dinner. Apology accepted?"

He slipped forward, pressed his lips to hers. She kissed back, politely at first and then with more warmth. Her fingers cupped his neck for a moment, then pulled him away.

"You're entirely too good at that. You should go now," she said. "On duty and all."

"Okay," he said, and didn't turn to go.

"Jim," she said, and the shipwide comm system clicked on.

"Holden to the bridge," Captain McDowell said, his voice compressed and echoing. Holden replied with something obscene. Ade laughed. He swooped in, kissed her cheek, and headed back for the central lift, quietly hoping that Captain McDowell suffered boils and public humiliation for his lousy timing.

The bridge was hardly larger than Holden's quarters and smaller by half than the galley. Except for the slightly oversized captain's display, required by Captain McDowell's failing eyesight and general distrust of corrective surgery, it could have been an accounting firm's back room. The air smelled of cleaning astringent and someone's overly strong yerba maté tea. McDowell shifted in his seat as Holden approached. Then the captain leaned back, pointing over his shoulder at the communications station.

"Becca!" McDowell snapped. "Tell him."

Rebecca Byers, the comm officer on duty, could have been bred from a shark and a hatchet. Black eyes, sharp features, lips so thin they might as well not have existed. The story on board was that she'd taken the job to escape prosecution for killing an ex-husband. Holden liked her.

"Emergency signal," she said. "Picked it up two hours ago. The transponder verification just bounced back from *Callisto.* It's real."

"Ah," Holden said. And then: "Shit. Are we the closest?"

"Only ship in a few million klicks."

"Well. That figures," Holden said.

Becca turned her gaze to the captain. McDowell cracked his knuckles and stared at his display. The light from the screen gave him an odd greenish cast.

"It's next to a charted non-Belt asteroid," McDowell said.

"Really?" Holden said in disbelief. "Did they run into it? There's nothing else out here for millions of kilometers."

“Maybe they pulled over because someone had to go potty. All we have is that some knucklehead is out there, blasting an emergency signal, and we’re the closest. Assuming… ”

The law of the solar system was unequivocal. In an environment as hostile to life as space, the aid and goodwill of your fellow humans wasn’t optional. The emergency signal, just by existing, obligated the nearest ship to stop and render aid—which didn’t mean the law was universally followed.

The *Canterbury* was fully loaded. Well over a million tons of ice had been gently accelerated for the past month. Just like the little glacier that had crushed Paj’s arm, it was going to be hard to slow down. The temptation to have an unexplained comm failure, erase the logs, and let the great god Darwin have his way was always there.

But if McDowell had really intended that, he wouldn’t have called Holden up. Or made the suggestion where the crew could hear him. Holden understood the dance. The captain was going to be the one who would have blown it off except for Holden. The grunts would respect the captain for not wanting to cut into the ship’s profit. They’d respect Holden for insisting that they follow the rule. No matter what happened, the captain and Holden would both be hated for what they were required by law and mere human decency to do.

“We have to stop,” Holden said. Then, gamely: “There may be salvage.”

McDowell tapped his screen. Ade’s voice came from the console, as low and warm as if she’d been in the room.

“Captain?”

“I need numbers on stopping this crate,” he said.

“Sir?”

“How hard is it going to be to put us alongside CA-2216862?”

“We’re stopping at an asteroid?”

“I’ll tell you when you’ve followed my order, Navigator Tukunbo.”

“Yes, sir,” she said. Holden heard a series of clicks. “If we flip the ship right now and burn like hell for most of two days, I can get us within fifty thousand kilometers, sir.”

“Can you define ‘burn like hell’?” McDowell said.

“We’ll need everyone in crash couches.”

“Of course we will,” McDowell sighed, and scratched his scruffy beard. “And shifting ice is only going to do a couple million bucks’ worth of banging up the hull, if we’re lucky. I’m getting old for this, Holden. I really am.”

“Yes, sir. You are. And I’ve always liked your chair,” Holden said. McDowell scowled and made an obscene gesture. Rebecca snorted in laughter. McDowell turned to her.

“Send a message to the beacon that we’re on our way. And let Ceres

know we're going to be late. Holden, where does the *Knight* stand?"

"No flying in atmosphere until we get some parts, but she'll do fine for fifty thousand klicks in vacuum."

"You're sure of that?"

"Naomi said it. That makes it true."

McDowell rose, unfolding to almost two and a quarter meters and thinner than a teenager back on Earth. Between his age and never having lived in a gravity well, the coming burn was likely to be hell on the old man. Holden felt a pang of sympathy that he would never embarrass McDowell by expressing.

"Here's the thing, Jim," McDowell said, his voice quiet enough that only Holden could hear him. "We're required to stop and make an attempt, but we don't have to go out of our way, if you see what I mean."

"We'll already have stopped," Holden said, and McDowell patted at the air with his wide, spidery hands. One of the many Belter gestures that had evolved to be visible when wearing an environment suit.

"I can't avoid that," he said. "But if you see anything out there that seems off, don't play hero again. Just pack up the toys and come home."

"And leave it for the next ship that comes through?"

"And keep yourself safe," McDowell said. "Order. Understood?"

"Understood," Holden said.

As the shipwide comm system clicked to life and McDowell began explaining the situation to the crew, Holden imagined he could hear a chorus of groans coming up through the decks. He went over to Rebecca.

"Okay," he said, "what have we got on the broken ship?"

"Light freighter. Martian registry. Shows Eros as home port. Calls itself *Scopuli*… "

Chapter Two: Miller

Detective Miller sat back on the foam-core chair, smiling gentle encouragement while he scrambled to make sense of the girl's story.

"And then it was all pow! Room full up with bladeboys howling and humping shank," the girl said, waving a hand. "Look like a dance number, 'cept that Bomie's got this look he didn't know nothing never and ever amen. You know, que?"

Havelock, standing by the door, blinked twice. The squat man's face twitched with impatience. It was why Havelock was never going to make senior detective. And why he sucked at poker.

Miller was very good at poker.

"I totally," Miller said. His voice had taken on the twang of an inner level resident. He waved his hand in the same lazy arc the girl used. "Bomie, he didn't see. Forgotten arm."

"Forgotten fucking arm, yeah," the girl said as if Miller had spoken a line of gospel. Miller nodded, and the girl nodded back like they were two birds doing a mating dance.

The rent hole was three cream-and-black-fleck-painted rooms—bathroom, kitchen, living room. The struts of a pull-down sleeping loft in the living room had been broken and repaired so many times they didn't retract anymore. This near the center of Ceres' spin, that wasn't from gravity so much as mass in motion. The air smelled beery with old protein yeast and mushrooms. Local food, so whoever had bounced the girl hard enough to break her bed hadn't paid enough for dinner. Or maybe they did, and the girl had chosen to spend it on heroin or malta or MCK.

Her business, either way.

"Follow que?" Miller asked.

"Bomie vacuate like losing air," the girl said with a chuckle. "Bang-head hops, kennis tu?"

"Ken," Miller said.

"Now, all new bladeboys. Overhead. I'm out."

"And Bomie?"

The girl's eyes made a slow track up Miller, shoes to knees to porkpie hat. Miller chuckled. He gave the chair a light push, sloping up to his feet in the low gravity.

"He shows, and I asked, que si?" Miller said.

"Como no?" the girl said. *Why not?*

The tunnel outside was white where it wasn't grimy. Ten meters wide, and gently sloping up in both directions. The white LED lights didn't pretend to mimic sunlight. About half a kilometer down,

someone had rammed into the wall so hard the native rock showed through, and it still hadn't been repaired. Maybe it wouldn't be. This was the deep dig, way up near the center of spin. Tourists never came here.

Havelock led the way to their cart, bouncing too high with every step. He didn't come up to the low gravity levels very often, and it made him awkward. Miller had lived on Ceres his whole life, and truth to tell, the Coriolis effect up this high could make him a little unsteady sometimes too.

"So," Havelock said as he punched in their destination code, "did you have fun?"

"Don't know what you mean," Miller said.

The electrical motors hummed to life, and the cart lurched forward into the tunnel, squishy foam tires faintly squeaking.

"Having your outworld conversation in front of the Earth guy?" Havelock said. "I couldn't follow even half of that."

"That wasn't Belters keeping the Earth guy out," Miller said. "That was poor folks keeping the educated guy out. And it was kind of fun, now you mention it."

Havelock laughed. He could take being teased and keep on moving. It was what made him good at team sports: soccer, basketball, politics.

Miller wasn't much good at those.

Ceres, the port city of the Belt and the outer planets, boasted two hundred fifty kilometers in diameter, tens of thousands of kilometers of tunnels in layer on layer on layer. Spinning it up to 0.3 g had taken the best minds at Tycho Manufacturing half a generation, and they were still pretty smug about it. Now Ceres had more than six million permanent residents, and as many as a thousand ships docking in any given day meant upping the population to as high as seven million.

Platinum, iron, and titanium from the Belt. Water from Saturn, vegetables and beef from the big mirror-fed greenhouses on Ganymede and Europa, organics from Earth and Mars. Power cells from Io, Helium-3 from the refineries on Rhea and Iapetus. A river of wealth and power unrivaled in human history came through Ceres. Where there was commerce on that level, there was also crime. Where there was crime, there were security forces to keep it in check. Men like Miller and Havelock, whose business it was to track the electric carts up the wide ramps, feel the false gravity of spin fall away beneath them, and ask low-rent glitz whores about what happened the night Bomie Chatterjee stopped collecting protection money for the Golden Bough Society.

The primary station house for Star Helix Security, police force and military garrison for the Ceres Station, was on the third level from the asteroid's skin, two kilometers square and dug into the rock so high

Miller could walk from his desk up five levels without ever leaving the offices. Havelock turned in the cart while Miller went to his cubicle, downloaded the recording of their interview with the girl, and reran it. He was halfway through when his partner lumbered up behind him.

"Learn anything?" Havelock asked.

"Not much," Miller said. "Bomie got jumped by a bunch of unaffiliated local thugs. Sometimes a low-level guy like Bomie will hire people to pretend to attack him so he can heroically fight them off. Ups his reputation. That's what she meant when she called it a dance number. The guys that went after him were that caliber, only instead of turning into a ninja badass, Bomie ran away and hasn't come back."

"And now?"

"And now nothing," Miller said. "That's what I don't get. Someone took out a Golden Bough purse boy, and there's no payback. I mean, okay, Bomie's a bottom-feeder, but… "

"But once they start eating the little guys, there's less money coming up to the big guys," Havelock said. "So why hasn't the Golden Bough meted out some gangster justice?"

"I don't like this," Miller said.

Havelock laughed. "Belters," he said. "One thing goes weird and you think the whole ecosystem's crashing. If the Golden Bough's too weak to keep its claims, that's a good thing. They're the bad guys, remember?"

"Yeah, well," Miller said. "Say what you will about organized crime, at least it's organized."

Havelock sat on the small plastic chair beside Miller's desk and craned to watch the playback.

"Okay," Havelock said. "What the hell is the 'forgotten arm'?"

"Boxing term," Miller said. "It's the hit you didn't see coming."

The computer chimed and Captain Shaddid's voice came from the speakers.

"Miller? Are you there?"

"Mmm," Havelock said. "Bad omen."

"What?" the captain asked, her voice sharp. She had never quite overcome her prejudice against Havelock's inner planet origins. Miller held up a hand to silence his partner.

"Here, Captain. What can I do for you?"

"Meet me in my office, please."

"On my way," he said.

Miller stood, and Havelock slid into his chair. They didn't speak. Both of them knew that Captain Shaddid would have called them in together if she'd wanted Havelock to be there. Another reason the man would never make senior detective. Miller left him alone with the

playback, trying to parse the fine points of class and station, origin and race. Lifetime's work, that.

Captain Shaddid's office was decorated in a soft, feminine style. Real cloth tapestries hung from the walls, and the scent of coffee and cinnamon came from an insert in her air filter that cost about a tenth of what the real foodstuffs would have. She wore her uniform casually, her hair down around her shoulders in violation of corporate regulations. If Miller had ever been called upon to describe her, the phrase *deceptive coloration* would have figured in. She nodded to a chair, and he sat.

"What have you found?" she asked, but her gaze was on the wall behind him. This wasn't a pop quiz; she was just making conversation.

"Golden Bough's looking the same as Sohiro's crew and the Loca Greiga. Still on station, but… distracted, I guess I'd call it. They're letting little things slide. Fewer thugs on the ground, less enforcement. I've got half a dozen mid-level guys who've gone dark."

He'd caught her attention.

"Killed?" she asked. "An OPA advance?"

An advance by the Outer Planets Alliance was the constant bogeyman of Ceres security. Living in the tradition of Al Capone and Hamas, the IRA and the Red Martials, the OPA was beloved by the people it helped and feared by the ones who got in its way. Part social movement, part wannabe nation, and part terrorist network, it totally lacked an institutional conscience. Captain Shaddid might not like Havelock because he was from down a gravity well, but she'd work with him. The OPA would have put him in an airlock. People like Miller would only rate getting a bullet in the skull, and a nice plastic one at that. Nothing that might get shrapnel in the ductwork.

"I don't think so," he said. "It doesn't smell like a war. It's… Honestly, sir, I don't know what the hell it is. The numbers are great. Protection's down, unlicensed gambling's down. Cooper and Hariri shut down the underage whorehouse up on six, and as far as anyone can tell, it hasn't started up again. There's a little more action by independents, but that aside, it's all looking great. It just smells funny."

She nodded, but her gaze was back on the wall. He'd lost her interest as quickly as he'd gotten it.

"Well, put it aside," she said. "I have something. New contract. Just you. Not Havelock."

Miller crossed his arms.

"New contract," he said slowly. "Meaning?"

"Meaning Star Helix Security has accepted a contract for services separate from the Ceres security assignment, and in my role as site manager for the corporation, I'm assigning you to it."

"I'm fired?" he said.

Captain Shaddid looked pained.

"It's additional duty," she said. "You'll still have the Ceres assignments you have now. It's just that, in addition… Look, Miller, I think this is as shitty as you do. I'm not pulling you off station. I'm not taking you off the main contract. This is a favor someone down on Earth is doing for a shareholder."

"We're doing favors for shareholders now?" Miller asked.

"You are, yes," Captain Shaddid said. The softness was gone; the conciliatory tone was gone. Her eyes were dark as wet stone.

"Right, then," Miller said. "I guess I am."

Captain Shaddid held up her hand terminal. Miller fumbled at his side, pulled out his own, and accepted the narrow-beam transfer. Whatever this was, Shaddid was keeping it off the common network. A new file tree, labeled JMAO, appeared on his readout.

"It's a little-lost-daughter case," Captain Shaddid said. "Ariadne and Jules-Pierre Mao."

The names rang a bell. Miller pressed his fingertips onto the screen of his hand terminal.

"Mao-Kwikowski Mercantile?" he asked.

"The one."

Miller whistled low.

Maokwik might not have been one of the top ten corporations in the Belt, but it was certainly in the upper fifty. Originally, it had been a legal firm involved in the epic failure of the Venusian cloud cities. They'd used the money from that decades-long lawsuit to diversify and expand, mostly into interplanetary transport. Now the corporate station was independent, floating between the Belt and the inner planets with the regal majesty of an ocean liner on ancient seas. The simple fact that Miller knew that much about them meant they had enough money to buy and sell men like him on open exchange.

He'd just been bought.

"They're Luna-based," Captain Shaddid said. "All the rights and privileges of Earth citizenship. But they do a lot of shipping business out here."

"And they misplaced a daughter?"

"Black sheep," the captain said. "Went off to college, got involved with a group called the Far Horizons Foundation. Student activists."

"OPA front," Miller said.

"Associated," Shaddid corrected him. Miller let it pass, but a flicker of curiosity troubled him. He wondered which side Captain Shaddid would be on if the OPA attacked. "The family put it down to a phase. They've got two older children with controlling interest, so if Julie wanted to bounce around vacuum calling herself a freedom fighter,

there was no real harm."

"But now they want her found," Miller said.

"They do."

"What changed?"

"They didn't see fit to share that information."

"Right."

"Last records show she was employed on Tycho Station but maintained an apartment here. I've found her partition on the network and locked it down. The password is in your files."

"Okay," Miller said. "What's my contract?"

"Find Julie Mao, detain her, and ship her home."

"A kidnap job, then," he said.

"Yes."

Miller stared down at his hand terminal, flicking the files open without particularly looking at them. A strange knot had tied itself in his guts. He'd been working Ceres security for sixteen years, and he hadn't started with many illusions in place. The joke was that Ceres didn't have laws—it had police. His hands weren't any cleaner than Captain Shaddid's. Sometimes people fell out airlocks. Sometimes evidence vanished from the lockers. It wasn't so much that it was right or wrong as that it was justified. You spent your life in a stone bubble with your food, your water, your *air* shipped in from places so distant you could barely find them with a telescope, and a certain moral flexibility was necessary. But he'd never had to take a kidnap job before.

"Problem, Detective?" Captain Shaddid asked.

"No, sir," he said. "I'll take care of it."

"Don't spend too much time on it," she said.

"Yes, sir. Anything else?"

Captain Shaddid's hard eyes softened, like she was putting on a mask. She smiled.

"Everything going well with your partner?"

"Havelock's all right," Miller said. "Having him around makes people like me better by contrast. That's nice."

Her smile's only change was to become half a degree more genuine. Nothing like a little shared racism to build ties with the boss. Miller nodded respectfully and headed out.

His hole was on the eighth level, off a residential tunnel a hundred

meters wide with fifty meters of carefully cultivated green park running down the center. The main corridor's vaulted ceiling was lit by recessed lights and painted a blue that Havelock assured him matched the Earth's summer sky. Living on the surface of a planet, mass sucking at every bone and muscle, and nothing but gravity to keep your air close, seemed like a fast path to crazy. The blue was nice, though.

Some people followed Captain Shaddid's lead by perfuming their air. Not always with coffee and cinnamon scents, of course. Havelock's hole smelled of baking bread. Others opted for floral scents or semipheromones. Candace, Miller's ex-wife, had preferred something called EarthLily, which had always made him think of the waste recycling levels. These days, he left it at the vaguely astringent smell of the station itself. Recycled air that had passed through a million lungs. Water from the tap so clean it could be used for lab work, but it had been piss and shit and tears and blood and would be again. The circle of life on Ceres was so small you could see the curve. He liked it that way.

He poured a glass of moss whiskey, a native Ceres liquor made from engineered yeast, then took off his shoes and settled onto the foam bed. He could still see Candace's disapproving scowl and hear her sigh. He shrugged apology to her memory and turned back to work.

Juliette Andromeda Mao. He read through her work history, her academic records. Talented pinnace pilot. There was a picture of her at eighteen in a tailored vac suit with the helmet off: pretty girl with a thin, lunar citizen's frame and long black hair. She was grinning like the universe had given her a kiss. The linked text said she'd won first place in something called the Parrish/Dorn 500K. He searched briefly. Some kind of race only really rich people could afford to fly in. Her pinnace—the *Razorback*—had beaten the previous record and held it for two years.

Miller sipped his whiskey and wondered what had happened to the girl with enough wealth and power to own a private ship that would bring her here. It was a long way from competing in expensive space races to being hog-tied and sent home in a pod. Or maybe it wasn't.

"Poor little rich girl," Miller said to the screen. "Sucks to be you, I guess."

He closed the files and drank quietly and seriously, staring at the blank ceiling above him. The chair where Candace used to sit and ask him about his day stood empty, but he could see her there anyway. Now that she wasn't here to make him talk, it was easier to respect the impulse. She'd been lonely. He could see that now. In his imagination, she rolled her eyes.

An hour later, his blood warm with drink, he heated up a bowl of

real rice and fake beans—yeast and fungus could mimic anything if you had enough whiskey first—opened the door of his hole, and ate dinner looking out at the traffic gently curving by. The second shift streamed into the tube stations and then out of them. The kids who lived two holes down—a girl of eight and her brother of four—met their father with hugs, squeals, mutual accusations, and tears. The blue ceiling glowed in its reflected light, unchanging, static, reassuring. A sparrow fluttered down the tunnel, hovering in a way that Havelock assured him they couldn't on Earth. Miller threw it a fake bean.

He tried to think about the Mao girl, but in truth he didn't much care. Something was happening to the organized crime families of Ceres, and it made him jumpy as hell.

This thing with Julie Mao? It was a sideshow.

Chapter Three: Holden

After nearly two full days in high gravity, Holden's knees and back and neck ached. And his head. Hell, his feet. He walked in the crew hatch of the *Knight* just as Naomi was climbing up the ladder from its cargo bay. She smiled and gave him a thumbs-up.

"The salvage mech is locked down," she said. "Reactor is warming up. We're ready to fly."

"Good."

"We got a pilot yet?" she asked.

"Alex Kamal is on the ready rotation today, so he's our man. I kind of wish Valka had been up. He's not the pilot Alex is, but he's quieter, and my head hurts."

"I like Alex. He's ebullient," Naomi said.

"I don't know what *ebullient* means, but if it means Alex, it makes me tired."

Holden started up the ladder to ops and the cockpit. In the shiny black surface of a deactivated wall panel, Naomi's reflection smirked at his back. He couldn't understand how Belters, thin as pencils, bounced back from high g so quickly. Decades of practice and selective breeding, he assumed.

In ops, Holden strapped into the command console, the crash couch material silently conforming to his body. At the half g Ade put them on for the final approach, the foam felt good. He let a small groan slip out. The switches, plastic and metal made to withstand hard g and hundreds of years, clicked sharply. The *Knight* responded with an array of glowing diagnostic indicators and a near-subliminal hum.

A few minutes later, Holden glanced over to see Alex Kamal's thinning black hair appear, followed by his round cheerful face, a deep brown that years of shipboard life couldn't pale. Martian-raised, Alex had a frame that was thicker than a Belter's. He was slender compared to Holden, and even so, his flight suit stretched tight against his spreading waistline. Alex had flown in the Martian navy, but he'd clearly given up on the military-style fitness routine.

"Howdy, XO," he drawled. The old west affectation common to everyone from the Mariner Valley annoyed Holden. There hadn't been a cowboy on Earth in a hundred years, and Mars didn't have a blade of grass that wasn't under a dome, or a horse that wasn't in a zoo. Mariner Valley had been settled by East Indians, Chinese, and a small contingent of Texans. Apparently, the drawl was viral. They all had it now. "How's the old warhorse today?"

"Smooth so far. We need a flight plan. Ade will be bringing us to

relative stop in"—he checked the time readout—"forty, so work fast. I want to get out, get it done, and get the *Cant* back on course to Ceres before she starts rusting."

"Roger that," Alex said, climbing up to the *Knight*'s cockpit.

Holden's headset clicked; then Naomi's voice said, "Amos and Shed are aboard. We're all ready down here."

"Thanks. Just waiting on flight numbers from Alex and we'll be ready to go."

The crew was the minimum necessary: Holden as command, Alex to get them there and back, Shed in case there were survivors to treat, Naomi and Amos for salvage if there weren't.

It wasn't long before Alex called down, "Okay, Boss. It'll be about a four-hour trip flyin' teakettle. Total mass use at about thirty percent, but we've got a full tank. Total mission time: eleven hours."

"Copy that. Thanks, Alex," Holden said.

Flying teakettle was naval slang for flying on the maneuvering thrusters that used superheated steam for reaction mass. The *Knight*'s fusion torch would be dangerous to use this close to the *Canterbury* and wasteful on such a short trip. Torches were pre-Epstein fusion drives and far less efficient.

"Calling for permission to leave the barn," Holden said, and clicked from internal comm to the link with the *Canterbury*'s bridge. "Holden here. *Knight* is ready to fly."

"Okay, Jim, go ahead," McDowell said. "Ade's bringing her to a stop now. You kids be careful out there. That shuttle is expensive and I've always sort of had a thing for Naomi."

"Roger that, Captain," Holden said. Back on the internal comm, he buzzed Alex. "Go ahead and take us out."

Holden leaned back in his chair and listened to the creaks of the *Canterbury*'s final maneuvers, the steel and ceramics as loud and ominous as the wood planks of a sailing ship. Or an Earther's joints after high g. For a moment, Holden felt sympathy for the ship.

They weren't really stopping, of course. Nothing in space ever actually stopped; it only came into a matching orbit with some other object. They were now following CA-2216862 on its merry millennium-long trip around the sun.

Ade sent them the green light, and Holden emptied out the hangar bay air and popped the doors. Alex took them out of the dock on white cones of superheated steam.

They went to find the *Scopuli.*

CA-2216862 was a rock a half kilometer across that had wandered away from the Belt and been yanked around by Jupiter's enormous gravity. It had eventually found its own slow orbit around the sun in the vast expanse between Jupiter and the Belt, territory empty even for space.

The sight of the *Scopuli* resting gently against the asteroid's side, held in place by the rock's tiny gravity, gave Holden a chill. Even if it was flying blind, every instrument dead, its odds of hitting such an object by chance were infinitesimally low. It was a half-kilometer-wide roadblock on a highway millions of kilometers in diameter. It hadn't arrived there by accident. He scratched the hairs standing up on the back of his neck.

"Alex, hold us at two klicks out," Holden said. "Naomi, what can you tell me about that ship?"

"Hull configuration matches the registry information. It's definitely the *Scopuli.* She's not radiating in the electromagnetic or infrared. Just that little distress beacon. Looks like the reactor's shut down. Must have been manual and not damage, because we aren't getting any radiation leakage either," Naomi said.

Holden looked at the pictures they were getting from the *Knight*'s scopes, as well as the image the *Knight* created by bouncing a laser off the *Scopuli*'s hull. "What about that thing that looks like a hole in the side?"

"Uh," Naomi said. "Ladar says it's a hole in the side."

Holden frowned. "Okay, let's stay here for a minute and recheck the neighborhood. Anything on the scope, Naomi?"

"Nope. And the big array on the *Cant* can spot a kid throwing rocks on Luna. Becca says there's nobody within twenty million klicks right now," Naomi said.

Holden tapped out a complicated rhythm on the arm of his chair and drifted up in the straps. He felt hot, and reached over to aim the closest air-circulation nozzle at his face. His scalp tingled with evaporating sweat.

If you see anything out there that seems off, don't play hero again. Just pack up the toys and come home. Those were his orders. He looked at the image of the *Scopuli,* the hole in its side.

"Okay," he said. "Alex, take us in to a quarter klick, and hold station there. We'll ride to the surface on the mech. Oh, and keep the torch warmed up and ready. If something nasty is hiding in that ship, I want to be able to run away as fast as I can and melt anything behind us into slag while I do it. Roger?"

"Got it, Boss. *Knight*'s in run-like-a-bunny mode till you say

otherwise," Alex replied.

Holden looked over the command console one more time, searching for the flashing red warning light that would give him permission to go back to the *Cant*. Everything remained a soft green. He popped open his buckles and shoved himself out of the chair. A push on the wall with one foot sent him over to the ladder, and he descended headfirst with gentle touches on the rungs.

In the crew area, Naomi, Amos, and Shed were still strapped into their crash couches. Holden caught the ladder and swung around so that his crew didn't look upside down. They started undoing their restraints.

"Okay, here's the situation. The *Scopuli* got holed, and someone left it floating next to this rock. No one is on the scopes, so maybe that means it happened a while ago and they left. Naomi, you'll be driving the salvage mech, and the three of us will tether on and catch a ride down to the wreck. Shed, you stay with the mech unless we find an injured person, which seems unlikely. Amos and I will go into the ship through that hole and poke around. If we find anything even remotely booby trap–like, we will come back to the mech, Naomi will fly us back to the *Knight,* and we will run away. Any questions?"

Amos raised one beefy hand. "Maybe we oughta be armed, XO. Case there's piratey types still lurking aboard."

Holden laughed. "Well, if there are, then their ride left without them. But if it makes you feel more comfortable, go ahead and bring a gun."

If the big, burly Earther mechanic was carrying a gun, it would make *him* feel better too, but better not to say it. Let them think the guy in charge felt confident.

Holden used his officer's key to open the weapon locker, and Amos took a high-caliber automatic that fired self-propelled rounds, recoilless and designed for use in zero g. Old-fashioned slug throwers were more reliable, but in null gravity they were also maneuvering thrusters. A traditional handgun would impart enough thrust to achieve escape velocity from a rock the size of CA-2216862.

The crew drifted down to the cargo bay, where the egg-shaped, spider-legged open cage of Naomi's mech waited. Each of the four legs had a manipulator claw at the end and a variety of cutting and welding tools built into it. The back pair could grip on to a ship's hull or other structure for leverage, and the front two could be used to make repairs or chop salvage into portable pieces.

"Hats on," Holden said, and the crew helped each other put on and secure their helmets. Everyone checked their own suit and then someone else's. When the cargo doors opened, it would be too late to make sure they were buttoned up right.

While Naomi climbed into her mech, Amos, Holden, and Shed secured their suit tethers to the cockpit's metal cage. Naomi checked the mech and then hit the switch to cycle the cargo bay's atmosphere and open the doors. Sound inside Holden's suit faded to just the hiss of air and the faint static of the radio. The air had a slight medicine smell.

Naomi went first, taking the mech down toward the asteroid's surface on small jets of compressed nitrogen, the crew trailing her on three-meter-long tethers. As they flew, Holden looked back up at the *Knight:* a blocky gray wedge with a drive cone stuck on the wider end. Like everything else humans built for space travel, it was designed to be efficient, not pretty. That always made Holden a little sad. There should be room for aesthetics, even out here.

The *Knight* seemed to drift away from him, getting smaller and smaller, while he didn't move. The illusion vanished when he turned around to look at the asteroid and felt they were hurtling toward it. He opened a channel to Naomi, but she was humming to herself as she flew, which meant she, at least, wasn't worried. He didn't say anything, but he left the channel open to listen to her hum.

Up close, the *Scopuli* didn't look all that bad. Other than the gaping hole in its flank, it didn't have any damage. It clearly hadn't hit the asteroid; it had just been left close enough that the microgravity had slowly reeled it in. As they approached, he snapped pictures with his suit helmet and transmitted them to the *Canterbury*.

Naomi brought them to a stop, hovering three meters above the hole in the *Scopuli*'s side. Amos whistled across the general suit channel.

"That wasn't a torpedo did this, XO. This was a breaching charge. See how the metal's bent in all around the edges? That's shaped charges stuck right on her hull," Amos said.

In addition to being a fine mechanic, Amos was the one who used explosive surgery to crack open the icebergs floating around Saturn and turn them into more manageable chunks. Another reason to have him on the *Knight*.

"So," Holden said, "our friends here on the *Scopuli* stop, let someone climb onto their hull and plant a breaching charge, and then crack them open and let all the air out. Does that make sense to anyone?"

"Nope," Naomi said. "It doesn't. Still want to go inside?"

If you see anything out there that seems off, don't play hero again. Just pack up the toys and come home.

But what could he have expected? Of course the *Scopuli* wasn't up and running. Of course something had gone wrong. *Off* would have been not seeing anything strange.

"Amos," Holden said, "keep that gun out, just in case. Naomi, can

you make us a bigger hole? And be careful. If anything looks wrong, back us off."

Naomi brought the mech in closer, nitrogen blasts no more than a white breath on a cold night. The mech's welding torch blazed to life, red hot, then white, then blue. In silence, the mech's arms unfurled—an insectile movement—and Naomi started cutting. Holden and Amos dropped to the ship's surface, clamping on with magnetic boots. He could feel the vibration in his feet when Naomi pulled a length of hull free. A moment later the torch turned off, and Naomi blasted the fresh edges of the hole with the mech's fire-suppression gear to cool them. Holden gave Amos the thumbs-up and dropped himself very slowly into the *Scopuli*.

The breaching charge had been placed almost exactly amidships, blasting a hole into the galley. When Holden landed and his boots grabbed on to the galley wall, he could feel flash-frozen bits of food crunch under them. There were no bodies in sight.

"Come on in, Amos. No crew visible yet," Holden called over the suit comm.

He moved off to the side and a moment later Amos dropped in, gun clutched in his right hand and a powerful light in his left. The white beam played across the walls of the destroyed galley.

"Which way first, XO?" Amos asked.

Holden tapped on his thigh with one hand and thought. "Engineering. I want to know why the reactor's off-line."

They took the crew ladder, climbing along it toward the aft of the ship. All the pressure doors between decks were open, which was a bad sign. They should all be closed by default, and certainly if the atmosphere-loss alarm had sounded. If they were open, that meant there were no decks with atmosphere left in the ship. Which meant no survivors. Not a surprise, but it still felt like a defeat. They passed through the small ship quickly, pausing in the machine shop. Expensive engine parts and tools were still in place.

"Guess it wasn't robbery," Amos said.

Holden didn't say, *Then what was it?* but the question hung between them anyway.

The engine room was neat as a pin, cold, and dead. Holden waited while Amos looked it over, spending at least ten minutes just floating around the reactor.

"Someone went through the shutdown procedures," Amos said. "The reactor wasn't killed by the blast, it was turned off afterward. No damage that I can see. Don't make sense. If everyone is dead from the attack, who shut it down? And if it's pirates, why not take the ship? She'll still fly."

"And before they turned off the power, they went through and

opened every interior pressure door on the ship. Emptied out the air. I guess they wanted to make sure no one was hiding," Holden said. "Okay, let's head back up to ops and see if we can crack the computer core. Maybe it can tell us what happened."

They floated back toward the bow along the crew ladder, and up to the ops deck. It too was undamaged and empty. The lack of bodies was starting to bother Holden more than the presence of them would have. He floated over to the main computer console and hit a few keys to see if it might still be running on backup power. It wasn't.

"Amos, start cutting the core out. We'll take it with us. I'm going to check comms, see if I can find that beacon."

Amos moved to the computer and started taking out tools and sticking them to the bulkhead next to it. He began a profanity-laced mumble as he worked. It wasn't nearly as charming as Naomi's humming, so Holden turned off his link to Amos while he moved to the communications console. It was as dead as the rest of the ship. He found the ship's beacon.

No one had activated it. Something else had called them. Holden moved back, frowning.

He looked through the space, searching for something out of place. There, on the deck beneath the comm operator's console. A small black box not connected to anything else.

His heart took a long pause between beats. He called out to Amos, "Does that look like a bomb to you?"

Amos ignored him. Holden turned his radio link back on.

"Amos, does that look like a bomb to you?" He pointed at the box on the deck.

Amos left his work on the computer and floated over to look, then, in a move that made Holden's throat close, grabbed the box off the deck and held it up.

"Nope. It's a transmitter. See?" He held it up in front of Holden's helmet. "It's just got a battery taped to it. What's it doing there?"

"It's the beacon we followed. Jesus. The ship's beacon never even turned on. Someone made a fake one out of that transmitter and hooked it up to a battery," Holden said quietly, still fighting his panic.

"Why would they do that, XO? That don't make no kinda sense."

"It would if there's something about this transmitter that's different from standard," Holden said.

"Like?"

"Like if it had a second signal triggered to go when someone found it," Holden said, then switched to the general suit channel. "Okay, boys and girls, we've found something weird, and we're out of here. Everyone back to the *Knight,* and be very careful when you—"

His radio crackled to life on the outside channel, McDowell's voice

filling his helmet. “Jim? We may have a problem.”

Chapter Four: Miller

Miller was halfway through his evening meal when the system in his hole chirped. He glanced at the sending code. The Blue Frog. It was a port bar catering to the constant extra million noncitizens of Ceres that advertised itself as a near-exact replica of a famous Earth bar in Mumbai, only with licensed prostitutes and legal drugs. Miller took another forkful of fungal beans and vat-grown rice and debated whether to accept connection.

Should have seen this one coming, he thought.

"What?" he asked.

A screen popped open. Hasini, the assistant manager, was a dark-skinned man with eyes the color of ice. The near smirk on his face was the result of nerve damage. Miller had done him a favor when Hasini had had the poor judgment to take pity on an unlicensed prostitute. Since then, security detective and portside barman had traded favors. The unofficial, gray economics of civilization.

"Your partner's here again," Hasini said over the pulse and wail of bhangra music. "I think he's having a bad night. Should I keep serving him?"

"Yeah," Miller said. "Keep him happy for… Give me twenty minutes."

"He doesn't want to be kept happy. He very much wants a reason to get unhappy."

"Make it hard to find. I'll be there."

Hasini nodded, smirking his damaged smirk, and dropped the connection. Miller looked at his half-eaten meal, sighed, and shoved the remains into the recycling bin. He pulled on a clean shirt, then hesitated. The Blue Frog was always warmer than he liked, and he hated wearing a jacket. Instead, he put a compact plastic pistol in his ankle holster. Not as fast a draw, but if it got that far, he was screwed anyway.

Ceres at night was indistinguishable from Ceres in the daytime. There had been a move, back when the station first opened, to dim and brighten the lights through the traditional human twenty-four-hour cycle, mimicking the spin of Earth. The affectation had lasted four months before the council killed it.

On duty, Miller would have taken an electric cart down the wide tunnels and down to the port levels. He was tempted even though he was off duty, but a deep-seated superstition stopped him. If he took the cart, he was going as a cop, and the tubes ran just fine. Miller walked to the nearest station, checked the status, and sat on the low

stone bench. A man about Miller's age and a girl no more than three came in a minute later and sat across from him. The girl's talk was as fast and meaningless as a leaking seal, and her father responded with grunts and nods at more or less appropriate moments.

Miller and the new man nodded to each other. The girl tugged at her father's sleeve, demanding his attention. Miller looked at her—dark eyes, pale hair, smooth skin. She was already too tall to be mistaken for an Earth child, her limbs longer and thinner. Her skin had the pink flush of Belter babies, which came with the pharmaceutical cocktail that assured that their muscles and bones would grow strong. Miller saw the father notice his attention. Miller smiled and nodded toward the kid.

"How old?" he asked.

"Two and a half," the father said.

"Good age."

The father shrugged, but he smiled.

"Kids?" he asked.

"No," Miller said. "But I've a got a divorce about that old."

They chuckled together as if it was funny. In his imagination, Candace crossed her arms and looked away. The soft oil-and-ozone-scented breeze announced the tube's arrival. Miller let father and child go first, then chose a different compartment.

The tube cars were round, built to fit into the evacuated passages. There were no windows. The only view would have been stone humming by three centimeters from the car. Instead, broad screens advertised entertainment feeds or commented on inner planet political scandals or offered the chance to gamble away a week's pay at casinos so wonderful that your life would seem richer for the experience. Miller let the bright, empty colors dance and ignored their content. Mentally, he was holding up his problem, turning it one way and then the other, not even looking for an answer.

It was a simple mental exercise. Look at the facts without judgment: Havelock was an Earther. Havelock was in a portside bar again and looking for a fight. Havelock was his partner. Statement after statement, fact after fact, facet after facet. He didn't try to put them in order or make some kind of narrative out of them; that would all come later. Now it was enough to wash the day's cases out of his head and get ready for the immediate situation. By the time the tube reached his station, he felt centered. Like he was walking on his whole foot, was how he'd described it, back when he had anyone to describe it to.

The Blue Frog was crowded, the barn-heat of bodies adding to the fake-Mumbai temperature and artificial air pollution. Lights glittered and flashed in seizure-inducing display. Tables curved and undulated,

the backlight making them seem darker than merely black. Music moved through the air with a physical presence, each beat a little concussion. Hasini, standing in a clot of steroid-enhanced bouncers and underdressed serving girls, caught Miller's eyes and nodded toward the back. Miller didn't acknowledge anything; he just turned and made his way through the crowd.

Port bars were always volatile. Miller was careful not to bump into anyone if he could help it. When he had to choose, he'd run into Belters before inner planet types, women before men. His face was a constant mild apology.

Havelock was sitting alone, with one thick hand wrapping a fluted glass. When Miller sat down beside him, Havelock turned toward him, ready to take offense, nostrils flared and eyes wide. Then the surprise registered. Then something like sullen shame.

"Miller," he said. In the tunnels outside, he would have been shouting. Here, it was barely enough to carry as far as Miller's chair. "What're you doing here?"

"Nothing much to do at the hole," Miller said. "Thought I'd come pick a fight."

"Good night for it," Havelock said.

It was true. Even in the bars that catered to inner planet types, the mix was rarely better than one Earther or Martian in ten. Squinting out at the crowd, Miller saw that the short, stocky men and women were nearer a third.

"Ship come in?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"EMCN?" he asked. The Earth-Mars Coalition Navy often passed through Ceres on its way to Saturn, Jupiter, and the stations of the Belt, but Miller hadn't been paying enough attention to the relative position of the planets to know where the orbits all stood. Havelock shook his head.

"Corporate security rotating out of Eros," he said. "Protogen, I think." A serving girl appeared at Miller's side, tattoos gliding over her skin, her teeth glowing in the black light. Miller took the drink she offered him, though he hadn't ordered. Soda water.

"You know," Miller said, leaning close enough to Havelock that even his normal conversational voice would reach the man, "it doesn't matter how many of their asses you kick. Shaddid's still not going to like you."

Havelock snapped to stare at Miller, the anger in his eyes barely covering the shame and hurt.

"It's true," Miller said.

Havelock rose lurching to his feet and headed for the door. He was trying to stomp, but in the Ceres spin gravity and his inebriated state,

he misjudged. It looked like he was hopping. Miller, glass in hand, slid through the crowd in Havelock's wake, calming with a smile and a shrug the affronted faces that his partner left behind him.

The common tunnels down near the port had a layer of grime and grease to them that air scrubbers and astringent cleaners could never quite master. Havelock walked out, shoulders hunched, mouth tight, rage radiating from him like heat. But the doors of the Blue Frog closed behind them, the seal cutting off the music like someone hitting mute. The worst of the danger had passed.

"I'm not drunk," Havelock said, his voice too loud.

"Didn't say you were."

"And you," Havelock said, turning and stabbing an accusing finger at Miller's chest. "You are not my nanny."

"Also true."

They walked together for maybe a quarter of a kilometer. The bright LED signs beckoned. Brothels and shooting galleries, coffee bars and poetry clubs, casinos and show fights. The air smelled like piss and old food. Havelock began to slow, his shoulders coming down from around his ears.

"I worked homicide in Terrytown," Havelock said. "I did three years vice at L-5. Do you have any idea what that was like? They were shipping kids out of there, and I'm one of three guys that stopped it. I'm a good cop."

"Yes, you are."

"I'm damn good."

"You are."

They walked past a noodle bar. A coffin hotel. A public terminal, its displays running a free newsfeed: COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS PLAGUE PHOEBE SCIENCE STATION. NEW ANDREAS K GAME NETS 6 BILLION DOLLARS IN 4 HOURS. NO DEAL IN MARS, BELT TITANIUM CONTRACT. The screens glowed in Havelock's eyes, but he was staring past them.

"I'm a damn good cop," he said again. Then, a moment later: "So what the hell?"

"It's not about you," Miller said. "People look at you, they don't see Dmitri Havelock, good cop. They see Earth."

"That's crap. I was eight years in the orbitals and on Mars before I ever shipped out here. I worked on Earth maybe six months total."

"Earth. Mars. They're not that different," Miller said.

"Try telling that to a Martian," Havelock said with a bitter laugh. "They'll kick your ass for you."

"I didn't mean… Look, I'm sure there are all kinds of differences. Earth hates Mars for having a better fleet. Mars hates Earth for having a bigger one. Maybe soccer's better in full g; maybe it's worse. I don't know. I'm just saying anyone this far out from the sun? They don't

care. From this distance, you can cover Earth and Mars with one thumb. And… ”

“And I don’t belong,” Havelock said.

The door of the noodle bar behind them opened and four Belters in gray-green uniforms came out. One of them wore the split circle of the OPA on his sleeve. Miller tensed, but the Belters didn’t come toward them, and Havelock didn’t notice them. Near miss.

“I knew,” Havelock said. “When I took the Star Helix contract, I knew I’d have to work to fit in. I thought it’d be the same as anywhere, you know? You go, you get your chops busted for a while. Then, when they see you can take it, they treat you like one of the team. It’s not like that here.”

“It’s not,” Miller said.

Havelock shook his head, spat, and stared at the fluted glass in his hand.

“I think we just stole some glasses from the Blue Frog,” Havelock said.

“We’re also in a public corridor with unsealed alcohol,” Miller said. “Well, you are, anyway. Mine’s soda water.”

Havelock chuckled, but there was despair in the sound. When Havelock spoke again, his voice was only rueful.

“You think I’m coming down here, picking fights with people from the inner planets so that Shaddid and Ramachandra and all the rest of them will think better of me.”

“It occurred to me.”

“You’re wrong,” Havelock said.

“Okay,” Miller said. He knew he wasn’t.

Havelock raised his fluted glass. “Take these back?” he asked.

“How about Distinguished Hyacinth?” Miller countered. “I’ll buy.”

The Distinguished Hyacinth Lounge was up three levels, far enough that foot traffic from the port levels was minimal. And it was a cop bar. Mostly Star Helix Security, but some of the minor corporate forces—Protogen, Pinkwater, Al Abbiq—hung out there too. Miller was more than half certain that his partner’s latest breakdown had been averted, but if he was wrong, better to keep it in the family.

The décor was pure Belt—old-style ships’ folding tables and chairs set into the wall and ceiling as if the gravity might shut off at any moment. Snake plant and devil’s ivy—staples of first-generation air recycling—decorated the wall and freestanding columns. The music was soft enough to talk over, loud enough to keep private conversations private. The first owner, Javier Liu, was a structural engineer from Tycho who’d come out during the big spin and liked Ceres enough to stay. His grandchildren ran it now. Javier the Third was standing behind the bar, talking with half of the vice and

exploitation team. Miller led the way to a back table, nodding to the men and women he knew as he passed. While he'd been careful and diplomatic at the Blue Frog, he chose a bluff masculinity here. It was just as much a pose.

"So," Havelock said as Javier's daughter Kate—a fourth generation for the same bar—left the table, Blue Frog glasses on her tray, "what is this supersecret private investigation Shaddid put you on? Or is the lowly Earther not supposed to know?"

"Is that what got to you?" Miller asked. "It's nothing. Some shareholders misplaced their daughter and want me to track her down, ship her home. It's a bullshit case."

"Sounds more like their backyard," Havelock said, nodding toward the V and E crowd.

"Kid's not a minor," Miller said. "It's a kidnap job."

"And you're good with that?"

Miller sat back. The ivy above them waved. Havelock waited, and Miller had the uncomfortable sense that a table had just been turned.

"It's my job," Miller said.

"Yeah, but we're talking about an adult here, right? It's not like she couldn't go back home if she wanted to be there. But instead her parents get security to take her home whether she wants to go or not. That's not law enforcement anymore. It's not even station security. It's just dysfunctional families playing power games."

Miller remembered the thin girl beside her racing pinnace. Her broad smile.

"I told you it was a bullshit case," Miller said.

Kate Liu returned to the table with a local beer and a glass of whiskey on her tray. Miller was glad for the distraction. The beer was his. Light and rich and just the faintest bit bitter. An ecology based on yeasts and fermentation meant subtle brews.

Havelock was nursing his whiskey. Miller took it as a sign that he was giving up on his bender. Nothing like being around the boys from the office to take the charm out of losing control.

"Hey, Miller! Havelock!" a familiar voice said. Yevgeny Cobb from homicide. Miller waved him over, and the conversation turned to homicide's bragging about the resolution of a particularly ugly case. Three months' work figuring out where the toxins came from ending with the corpse's wife awarded the full insurance settlement and a gray-market whore deported back to Eros.

By the end of the night, Havelock was laughing and trading jokes along with the rest of them. If there was occasionally a narrowed glance or a subtle dig, he took it in stride.

Miller was on his way up to the bar for another round when his terminal chimed. And then, slowly throughout the bar, fifty other

chimes sounded. Miller felt his belly knot as he and every other security agent in the place pulled out their terminals.

Captain Shaddid was on the broadcast screen. Her eyes were bleary and filled with banked rage; she was the very picture of a woman of power wakened early from sleep.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she said. "Whatever you're doing, drop it and go to your stations for emergency orders. We have a situation.

"Ten minutes ago, an unencrypted, signed message came in from the rough direction of Saturn. We haven't confirmed it as true, but the signature matches the keys on record. I've put a hold on it, but we can assume some asshole's going to put it on the network, and the shit should hit the fan about five minutes after that. If you're in earshot of a civilian, turn off now. For the rest of you, here's what we're up against."

Shaddid moved to one side, tapping her system interface. The screen went black. A moment later a man's face and shoulders appeared. He was in an orange vacuum suit with the helmet off. An Earther, maybe in his early thirties. Pale skin, blue eyes, dark short-cropped hair. Even before the man opened his mouth, Miller saw the signs of shock and rage in his eyes and the way he held his head forward.

"My name," the man said, "is James Holden."

Chapter Five: Holden

Ten minutes at two g, and Holden's head was already starting to ache. But McDowell had called them home at all haste. The *Canterbury* was warming up its massive drive. Holden didn't want to miss his ride.

"Jim? We may have a problem out here."
"Talk to me."
"Becca found something, and it is sufficiently weird to make my balls creep up. We're getting the hell out of here."

"Alex, how long?" Holden asked for the third time in ten minutes.
"We're over an hour out. Want to go on the juice?" Alex said.
Going on the juice was pilot-speak for a high-g burn that would knock an unmedicated human unconscious. *The juice* was the cocktail of drugs the pilot's chair would inject into him to keep him conscious, alert, and hopefully stroke-free when his body weighed five hundred kilos. Holden had used the juice on multiple occasions in the navy, and coming down afterward was unpleasant.
"Not unless we have to," he said.

"What kind of weird?"
"Becca, link him up. Jim, I want you seeing what we're seeing."

Holden tongued a painkiller tab from his suit's helmet and reran Becca's sensor feed for the fifth time. The spot in space lay about two hundred thousand kilometers from the *Canterbury*. As the *Cant* had

scanned it, the readout showed a fluctuation, the gray-black false color gradually developing a warm border. It was a small temperature climb, less than two degrees. Holden was amazed Becca had even spotted it. He reminded himself to give her a glowing review the next time she was up for promotion.

"Where did that come from?" Holden asked.

"No idea. It's just a spot faintly warmer than the background," Becca said. "I'd say it was a cloud of gas, because we get no radar return from it, but there aren't supposed to be any gas clouds out here. I mean, where would it come from?"

"Jim, any chance the Scopuli *killed the ship that killed it? Could it be a vapor cloud from a destroyed ship?" McDowell asked.*

"I don't think so, sir. The Scopuli *is totally unarmed. The hole in her side came from breaching charges, not torpedo fire, so I don't think they even fought back. It might be where the* Scopuli *vented, but… "*

"Or maybe not. Come back to the barn, Jim. Do it now."

"Naomi, what slowly gets hotter that gives no radar or ladar return when you scan it? Wild-ass guess here," Holden said.

"Hmmmm… ," Naomi said, giving herself time to think. "Anything that was absorbing the energy from the sensor package wouldn't give a return. But it might get hotter when it shed the absorbed energy."

The infrared monitor on the sensor console next to Holden's chair flared like the sun. Alex swore loudly over the general comm.

"Are you seein' that?" he said.

Holden ignored him and opened a channel to McDowell.

"Captain, we just got a massive IR spike," Holden said.

For long seconds, there was no reply. When McDowell came on the channel, his voice was tight. Holden had never heard the old man sound afraid before.

"Jim, a ship just appeared in that warm spot. It's radiating heat like a bastard," McDowell said. "Where the hell did that thing come from?"

Holden started to answer but then heard Becca's voice coming faintly through the captain's headset. "No idea, sir. But it's smaller than its heat signature. Radar shows frigate-sized," she said.

“With what?” McDowell said. “Invisibility? Magical wormhole teleportation?”

“Sir,” Holden said, “Naomi was speculating that the heat we picked up might have come from energy-absorbing materials. Stealth materials. Which means that ship was hiding on purpose. Which means its intentions are not good.”

As if in answer, six new objects appeared on his radar, glowing yellow icons appearing and immediately shifting to orange as the system marked their acceleration. On the *Canterbury,* Becca yelled out, “Fast movers! We have six new high-speed contacts on a collision course!”

“Jesus H. Christ on a pogo stick, did that ship just fire a spread of torpedoes at us?” McDowell said. “They’re trying to slap us down?”

“Yes, sir,” Becca said.

“Time to contact.”

“Just under eight minutes, sir,” she replied.

McDowell cursed under his breath.

“We’ve got pirates, Jim.”

“What do you need from us?” Holden said, trying to sound calm and professional.

“I need you to get off the radio and let my crew work. You’re an hour out at best. The torpedoes are eight minutes. McDowell out,” the captain said, his comm clicking off and leaving Holden listening to the faint hiss of static.

The general comm exploded with voices, Alex demanding to go on the juice and race the torpedoes to the *Cant,* Naomi chattering about missile-jamming strategies, Amos cursing at the stealth ship and questioning the parenting of its crew. Shed was the only quiet one.

“Everyone, shut up!” Holden yelled into his headset. The ship fell into shocked silence. “Alex, plot the fastest course to the *Cant* that won’t kill us. Let me know when you have it. Naomi, set up a three-way channel with Becca, you, and me. We’ll help however we can. Amos, keep cussing but turn your mic off.”

He waited. The clock ticked toward impact.

“Link is up,” Naomi said. Holden could hear two distinct sets of background noise over the comm channel.

“Becca, this is Jim. I’ve got Naomi on this channel too. Tell us what we can do to help. Naomi was talking about jamming techniques?”

“I’m doing everything I know to do,” Becca said, her voice astonishingly calm. “They’re painting us with a targeting laser. I’m broadcasting garbage to scramble it, but they’ve got really, really good shit. If we were any closer, that targeting laser would be burning a hole in our hull.”

“What about physical chaff?” Naomi asked. “Can you drop snow?”

While Naomi and Becca talked, Jim opened a private channel to Ade. “Hey, this is Jim. I have Alex working on a fast-burn solution so we can get there before… ”

“Before the missiles turn us into a flying brick? Good idea. Taken by pirates isn’t something you want to miss,” Ade said. He could hear the fear behind the mocking tone.

“Ade, please, I want to say something—”

“Jim, what do you think?” Naomi said on the other channel.

Holden cursed. To cover, he said, “Uh, about which thing?”

“Using the *Knight* to try and draw those missiles,” Naomi said.

“Can we do that?” he asked.

“Maybe. Were you listening at all?”

“Ah… something happened here, drew my attention for a minute. Tell me again,” Holden said.

“We try to match the frequency of the light scatter coming off the *Cant* and broadcast it with our comm array. Maybe the torpedoes will think we’re the target instead,” Naomi said like she was speaking to a child.

“And then they come blow us up?”

“I’m thinking we run away while pulling the torpedoes toward us. Then, when we get them far enough past the *Cant,* we kill the comm array and try to hide behind the asteroid,” Naomi said.

“Won’t work,” Holden said with a sigh. “They follow the targeting laser’s scatter for general guidance, but they also take telescope shots of the target on acquisition. They’ll take one look at us and know we aren’t their target.”

“Isn’t it worth a shot?”

“Even if we manage it, torpedoes designed to disable the *Cant* would make us into a greasy stretch of vacuum.”

“All right,” Naomi said. “What else have we got?”

“Nothing. Very smart boys in the naval labs have already thought of everything we are going to think of in the next eight minutes,” Holden said. Saying it out loud meant admitting it to himself.

“Then what are we doing here, Jim?” Naomi asked.

“Seven minutes,” Becca said, her voice still eerily calm.

“Let’s get there. Maybe we can get some people off the ship after it’s hit. Help with damage control,” Holden said. “Alex, got that plot figured out?”

“Roger that, XO. Bleeding-g burn-and-flip laid in. Angled approach course so our torch won’t burn a hole in the *Cant.* Time to rock and roll?” Alex replied.

“Yeah. Naomi, get your people strapped in for high g,” Holden said, then opened up a channel to Captain McDowell. “Captain, we’re coming in hot. Try to survive, and we’ll have the *Knight* on station for

pickup or to help with damage control."

"Roger," McDowell said, and killed the line.

Holden opened up his channel to Ade again. "Ade, we're going to burn hard, so I won't be talking, but leave this channel open for me, okay? Tell me what's happening. Hell, hum. Humming is nice. I just really need to hear you're all right."

"Okay, Jim," Ade said. She didn't hum but she left the channel open. He could hear her breathing.

Alex began the countdown over the general comm. Holden checked the straps on his crash couch and palmed the button that started the juice. A dozen needles stuck into his back through membranes in his suit. His heart shuddered and chemical bands of iron gripped his brain. His spine went dead cold, and his face flushed like a radiation burn. He pounded a fist into the arm of the crash couch. He hated this part, but the next one was worse. On the general comm, Alex whooped as the drugs hit his system. Belowdecks, the others were getting the drugs that kept them from dying but kept them sedated through the worst of it.

Alex said, "One," and Holden weighed five hundred kilos. The nerves at the back of his eye sockets screamed at the massive load of his eyeballs. His testicles crushed themselves against his thighs. He concentrated on not swallowing his tongue. Around him, the ship creaked and groaned. There was a disconcerting bang from belowdecks, but nothing on his panel went red. The *Knight*'s torch drive could deliver a lot of thrust, but at the cost of a prodigious fuel-burn rate. But if they could save the *Cant,* it wouldn't matter.

Over the blood pounding in his ears, Holden could hear Ade's gentle breathing and the click of her keyboard. He wished he could just go to sleep to that sound, but the juice was singing and burning in his blood. He was more awake than he'd ever been.

"Yes, sir," Ade said over the comm.

It took Holden a second to realize she was talking to McDowell. He turned up the volume to hear what the captain was saying.

"—the mains online, full power."

"We're fully loaded, sir. If we try to burn that hard, we'll tear the drive right off the mounts," Ade replied. McDowell must have asked her to fire up the Epstein.

"Mr. Tukunbo," McDowell said, "we have… four minutes. If you break it, I won't bill you."

"Yes, sir. Bringing mains online. Setting for maximum burn," Ade said, and in the background Holden could hear the high-g warning Klaxon. There was a louder clicking as Ade strapped herself in.

"Mains online in three… two… one… execute," Ade said.

The *Canterbury* groaned so loud Holden had to turn the comm

volume down. It moaned and shrieked like a banshee for several seconds, and then there was a shattering crash. He pulled up the exterior visual, fighting against the g-induced blackout at the edge of his vision. The *Canterbury* was in one piece.

"Ade, what the hell was that?" McDowell said, his speech slurred.

"The drive tearing a strut. Mains are off-line, sir," Ade replied, not saying *Exactly like I said would happen.*

"What did that buy us?" McDowell asked.

"Not much. The torpedoes are now at over forty klicks a second and accelerating. We're down to maneuvering thrusters," Ade said.

"Shit," McDowell said.

"They're going to hit us, sir," Ade said.

"Jim," McDowell said, his voice suddenly loud over the direct channel he'd opened. "We're going down, and there's no way around it. Click twice to acknowledge."

Jim clicked his radio twice.

"Okay, so, now we need to think about surviving after the hit. If they're looking to cripple us before boarding, they'll take out our drive and our comm array. Becca's been broadcasting an SOS ever since the torpedoes were fired, but I'd like you to keep yelling if we stop. If they know you're out there, they are less likely to toss everyone out an airlock. Witnesses, you know," McDowell said.

Jim clicked twice again.

"Turn around, Jim. Hide behind that asteroid. Call for help. Order."

Jim clicked twice, then signaled all-stop to Alex. In an instant, the giant sitting on his chest disappeared, replaced by weightlessness. The sudden transition would have made him throw up if his veins hadn't been coursing with antinausea drugs.

"What's up?" Alex said.

"New job," Holden said, teeth chattering from the juice. "We're calling for help and negotiating a release of prisoners once the bad guys have the *Cant.* Burn back to that asteroid, since it's the closest we can get to cover."

"Roger that, Boss," Alex said. He added in a lower voice, "I'd kill for a couple of tubes or a nice keel-mounted rail gun right now."

"I hear you."

"Wake up the kids downstairs?"

"Let them sleep."

"Roger that," Alex said, then clicked off.

Before the heavy g started up again, Holden turned on the *Knight*'s SOS. The channel to Ade was still open, and now that McDowell was off the line, he could hear her breathing again. He turned the volume all the way up and lay back in the straps, waiting to be crushed. Alex didn't disappoint him.

“One minute,” Ade said, her voice loud enough to distort through his helmet’s speakers. Holden didn’t turn the volume down. Her voice was admirably calm as she called out the impact countdown.

“Thirty seconds.”

Holden wanted desperately to talk, to say something comforting, to make ludicrous and untrue assertions of love. The giant standing on his chest just laughed with the deep rumble of their fusion torch.

“Ten seconds.”

“Get ready to kill the reactor and play dead after the torpedoes hit. If we’re not a threat, they won’t hit us again,” McDowell said.

“Five,” Ade said.

“Four.

“Three.

“Two.

“One.”

The *Canterbury* shuddered and the monitor went white. Ade took one sharp intake of breath, which cut off as the radio broke up. The static squeal almost ruptured Holden’s eardrums. He chinned the volume down and clicked his radio at Alex.

The thrust suddenly dropped to a tolerable two g and all the ship’s sensors flared into overload. A brilliant light poured through the small airlock porthole.

“Report, Alex, report! What happened?” Holden yelled.

“My God. They nuked her. They nuked the *Cant,*” Alex said, his voice low and dazed.

“What’s her status? Give me a report on the *Canterbury*! I have zero sensors down here. Everything’s just gone white!”

There was a long pause; then Alex said, “I have zero sensors up here too, Boss. But I can give you a status on the *Cant.* I can see her.”

“See her? From here?”

“Yeah. She’s a cloud of vapor the size of Olympus Mons. She’s gone, Boss. She’s gone.”

That can’t be right, Holden’s mind protested. That doesn’t happen. Pirates don’t nuke water haulers. No one wins. No one gets paid. And if you just want to murder fifty people, walking into a restaurant with a machine gun is a *lot* easier.

He wanted to shout it, scream at Alex that he was wrong. But he had to keep it together. *I’m the old man now.*

“All right. New mission, Alex. Now we’re witnesses to murder. Get us back to that asteroid. I’ll start compiling a broadcast. Wake everyone up. They need to know,” Holden said. “I’m rebooting the sensor package.”

He methodically shut down the sensors and their software, waited two minutes, then slowly brought them back online. His hands were

shaking. He was nauseated. His body felt like he was operating his flesh from a distance, and he didn't know how much was the juice and how much was shock.

The sensors came back up. Like any other ship that flew the space lanes, the *Knight* was hardened against radiation. You couldn't get anywhere near Jupiter's massive radiation belt unless you were. But Holden doubted the ship's designers had half a dozen nuclear weapons going off nearby in mind when they'd created the specs. They'd gotten lucky. Vacuum might protect them from an electromagnetic pulse, but the blast radiation could still have fried every sensor the ship had.

Once the array came back up, he scanned the space where the *Canterbury* had been. There was nothing larger than a softball. He switched over to the ship that killed it, which was flying off sunward at a leisurely one g. Heat bloomed in Holden's chest.

He wasn't scared. Aneurysm-inducing rage made his temples pound and his fists squeeze until his tendons hurt. He flipped on the comms and aimed a tightbeam at the retreating ship.

"This message is to whoever ordered the destruction of the *Canterbury,* the civilian ice freighter that you just blew into gas. You don't get to just fly away, you murderous son of a bitch. I don't care what your reasons are, but you just killed fifty friends of mine. You need to know who they were. I am sending to you the name and photograph of everyone who just died in that ship. Take a good look at what you did. Think about that while I work on finding out who you are."

He closed the voice channel, pulled up the *Canterbury*'s personnel files, and began transmitting the crew dossiers to the other ship.

"What are you doing?" asked Naomi from behind him, not from his helmet speakers.

She was standing there with her helmet off. Sweat plastered her thick black hair to her head and neck. Her face was unreadable. Holden took off his helmet.

"I'm showing them the *Canterbury* was a real place where real people lived. People with names and families," he said, the juice making his voice less steady than he would have liked. "If there's something resembling a human being giving the orders on that ship, I hope it haunts him right up to the day they put him in the recycler for murder."

"I don't think they appreciate it," Naomi said, pointing at the panel behind him.

The enemy ship was now painting them with its targeting laser. Holden held his breath. No torpedoes launched, and after a few seconds, the stealth ship turned off its laser and the engine flared as it scooted off at high g. He heard Naomi let out a shuddering breath.

"So the *Canterbury*'s gone?" Naomi asked.

Holden nodded.

"Fuck me sideways," said Amos.

Amos and Shed stood together at the crew ladder. Amos' face was mottled red and white, and his big hands clenched and unclenched. Shed collapsed to his knees, slamming against the deck in the heavy two-g thrust. He didn't cry. He just looked at Holden and said, "Cameron's never going to get that arm, I guess," then buried his head in his hands and shook.

"Slow down, Alex. No need to run now," Holden said into the comm. The ship slowly dropped to one g.

"What now, Captain?" Naomi said, looking at him hard. *You're in charge now. Act like it.*

"Blowing them out of the sky would be my first choice, but since we don't have the weapons… follow them. Keep our eyes on them until we know where they're going. Expose them to everyone," Holden replied.

"Fuckin' A," said Amos loudly.

"Amos," Naomi said over her shoulder, "take Shed below and get him into a couch. If you need to, give him something to put him to sleep."

"You got it, Boss." Amos put a thick arm around Shed's waist and took him below.

When he was gone, Naomi turned back to Holden.

"No, sir. We are *not* chasing that ship. We are going to call for help, and then go wherever the help tells us to go."

"I—" Holden started.

"Yes, you're in charge. That makes me XO, and it's the XO's job to tell the captain when he's being an idiot. You're being an idiot, sir. You already tried to goad them into killing us with that broadcast. Now you want to chase them? And what will you do if they let you catch them? Broadcast another emotional plea?" Naomi said, moving closer to him. "You are going to get the remaining four members of your crew to safety. And that's all. When we're safe, you can go on your crusade. Sir."

Holden unbuckled the straps on his couch and stood up. The juice was starting to burn out, leaving his body spent and sickened. Naomi lifted her chin and didn't back up.

"Glad you're with me, Naomi," he said. "Go see to the crew. McDowell gave me one last order."

Naomi looked him over critically; he could see her distrust. He didn't defend himself; he just waited until she was done. She nodded at him once and climbed down the ladder to the deck below.

Once she was gone, he worked methodically, putting together a

broadcast package that included all the sensor data from the *Canterbury* and the *Knight*. Alex climbed down from the cockpit and sat down heavily in the next chair.

"You know, Captain, I've been thinkin'," he said. His voice had the same post-juice shakes as Holden's own.

Holden bit back his irritation at the interruption and said, "What about?"

"That stealth ship."

Holden turned away from his work.

"Tell me."

"So, I don't know any pirates that have shit like that."

"Go on."

"In fact, the only time I've seen tech like that was back when I was in the navy," Alex said. "We were working on ships with energy-absorbing skins and internal heat sinks. More of a strategic weapon than a tactical one. You can't hide an active drive, but if you can get into position and shut the drive down, store all your waste heat internally, you can hide yourself pretty good. Add in the energy-absorbing skin, and radar, ladar, and passive sensors don't pick you up. Plus, pretty tough to get nuclear torpedoes outside of the military."

"You're saying the Martian navy did this?"

Alex took a long shuddering breath.

"If *we* had it, you know the Earthers were workin' on it too," he said.

They looked at each other across the narrow space, the implications heavier than a ten-g burn. Holden pulled the transmitter and battery they'd recovered from the *Scopuli* out of the thigh pocket of his suit. He started pulling it apart, looking for a stamp or an insignia. Alex watched, quiet for once. The transmitter was generic; it could have come from the radio room of any ship in the solar system. The battery was a nondescript gray block. Alex reached out and Holden handed it to him. Alex pried off the gray plastic cover and flipped the metal battery around in his hands. Without saying a word, he held the bottom up to Holden's face. Stamped in the black metal on the bottom of the battery was a serial number that began with the letters *MCRN*.

Martian Congressional Republic Navy.

The radio was set to broadcast on full power. The data package was

ready to transmit. Holden stood in front of the camera, leaning a little forward.

"My name is James Holden," he said, "and my ship, the *Canterbury,* was just destroyed by a warship with stealth technology and what appear to be parts stamped with Martian navy serial numbers. Data stream to follow."

Chapter Six: Miller

The cart sped through the tunnel, siren masking the whine of motors. Behind them, they left curious civilians and the scent of overheated bearings. Miller leaned forward in his seat, willing the cart to go faster. They were three levels and maybe four kilometers from the station house.

"Okay," Havelock said. "I'm sorry, but I'm missing something here."

"What?" Miller said. He meant *What are you yammering about?* Havelock took it as *What are you missing?*

"A water hauler millions of klicks from here got vaporized. Why are we going to full alert? Our cisterns will last months without even going on rationing. There are a lot of other haulers out there. Why is this a crisis?"

Miller turned and looked at his partner straight on. The small, stocky build. The thick bones from a childhood in full g. Just like the asshole in the transmission. They didn't understand. If Havelock had been in this James Holden's place, he might have done the same stupid, irresponsible, idiotic bullshit. For the space of a breath, they weren't security anymore. They weren't partners. They were a Belter and an Earther. Miller looked away before Havelock could see the change in his eyes.

"That prick Holden? The one in the broadcast?" Miller said. "He just declared war on Mars for us."

The cart swerved and bobbed, its internal computer adjusting for some virtual hiccup in the traffic flow half a kilometer ahead. Havelock shifted, grabbing for the support strut. They hit a ramp up to the next level, civilians on foot making a path for them.

"You grew up where the water's maybe dirty, but it falls out of the sky for you," Miller said. "The air's filthy, but it's not going away if your door seals fail. It's not like that out here."

"But we're not on the hauler. We don't need the ice. We aren't under threat," Havelock said.

Miller sighed, rubbing his eyes with thumb and knuckle until ghosts of false color bloomed.

"When I was homicide," Miller said, "there was this guy. Property management specialist working a contract out of Luna. Someone burned half his skin off and dropped him out an airlock. Turned out he was responsible for maintenance on sixty holes up on level thirty. Lousy neighborhood. He'd been cutting corners. Hadn't replaced the air filters in three months. There was mold growing in three of the units. And you know what we found after that?"

"What?" Havelock asked.

"Not a goddamn thing, because we stopped looking. Some people need to die, and he was one. And the next guy that took the job cleaned the ducting and swapped the filters on schedule. That's what it's like in the Belt. Anyone who came out here and didn't put environmental systems above everything else died young. All us still out here are the ones that cared."

"Selective effect?" Havelock said. "You're seriously arguing in favor of selective effect? I never thought I'd hear that shit coming out of you."

"What's that?"

"Racist propaganda bullshit," Havelock said. "It's the one that says the difference in environment has changed the Belters so much that instead of just being a bunch of skinny obsessive-compulsives, they aren't really human anymore."

"I'm not saying that," Miller said, suspecting that it was exactly what he was saying. "It's just that Belters don't take the long view when you screw with basic resources. That water was future air, propellant mass, and potables for us. We have no sense of humor about that shit."

The cart hit a ramp of metalwork grate. The lower level fell away below them. Havelock was silent.

"This Holden guy didn't say it was Mars. Just that they found a Martian battery. You think people are going to… declare war?" Havelock said. "Just on the basis of this one guy's pictures of a battery?"

"The ones that wait to get the whole story aren't our problem."

At least not tonight, he thought. *Once the whole story gets out, we'll see where we stand.*

The station house was somewhere between one-half and three-quarters full. Security men stood in clumps, nodding to each other, eyes narrow and jaws tight. One of the vice cops laughed at something, his amusement loud, forced, smelling of fear. Miller saw the change in Havelock as they walked across the common area to their desks. Havelock had been able to put Miller's reaction down to one man's being oversensitive. A whole room, though. A whole station house. By the time they reached their chairs, Havelock's eyes were wide.

Captain Shaddid came in. The bleary look was gone. Her hair was pulled back, her uniform crisp and professional, her voice as calm as a surgeon in a battlefield hospital. She stepped up on the first desk she came to, improvising a pulpit.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she said. "You've seen the transmission. Any questions?"

“Who let that fucking Earther near a radio?” someone shouted. Miller saw Havelock laugh along with the crowd, but it didn’t reach his eyes. Shaddid scowled and the crowd quieted.

“Here’s the situation,” she said. “No way we can control this information. It was broadcast everywhere. We have five sites on the internal network that have been mirroring it, and we have to assume it’s public knowledge starting ten minutes ago. Our job now is to keep the rioting to a minimum and ensure station integrity around the port. Station houses fifty and two thirteen are helping on it too. The port authority has released all the ships with inner planet registry. That doesn’t mean they’re all gone. They still have to round up their crews. But it does mean they’re going.”

“The government offices?” Miller said, loud enough to carry.

“Not our problem, thank God,” Shaddid said. “They have infrastructure in place. Blast doors are already down and sealed. They’ve broken off from the main environmental systems, so we aren’t even breathing their air right now.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” Yevgeny said from the cluster of homicide detectives.

“Now the bad news,” Shaddid said. Miller heard the silence of a hundred and fifty cops holding their breath. “We’ve got eighty known OPA agents on the station. They’re all employed and legal, and you know this is the kind of thing they’ve been waiting for. We have an order from the governor that we’re not going to do any proactive detention. No one gets arrested until they do something.”

Angry voices rose in chorus.

“Who does he think he is?” someone called from the back. Shaddid snapped at the comment like a shark.

“The governor is the one who contracted with us to keep this station in working order,” Shaddid said. “We’ll follow his directives.”

In his peripheral vision, Miller saw Havelock nod. He wondered what the governor thought of the question of Belter independence. Maybe the OPA weren’t the only ones who’d been waiting for something like this to happen. Shaddid went on, outlining the security response they were permitted. Miller listened with half an ear, so lost in speculating on the politics behind the situation he almost missed it when Shaddid called his name.

“Miller will take the second team to the port level and cover sectors thirteen through twenty-four. Kasagawa, team three, twenty-five through thirty-six, and so on. That’s twenty men apiece, except for Miller.”

“I can make it with nineteen,” Miller said, then quietly to Havelock, “You’re sitting this one out, partner. Having an Earther with a gun out there isn’t going to make things better.”

“Yeah,” Havelock said. “Saw that coming.”

“Okay,” Shaddid said. “You all know the drill. Let’s move.”

Miller rounded up his riot squad. All the faces were familiar, all men and women he’d worked with over his years in security. He organized them in his mind with a nearly automatic efficiency. Brown and Gelbfish both had SWAT experience, so they would lead the wings if it came to crowd control. Aberforth had three write-ups for excessive violence since her kid had been busted for drug running on Ganymede, so she was second string. She could work out her anger-management issues another time. Around the station house, he heard the other squad commanders making similar decisions.

“Okay,” Miller said. “Let’s suit up.”

They moved away in a group, heading for the equipment bay. Miller paused. Havelock remained leaning against his desk, arms folded, eyes locked on the middle distance. Miller was torn between sympathy for the man and impatience. It was hard being on the team but not on the team. On the other hand, what the hell had he expected, taking a contract in the Belt? Havelock looked up, meeting Miller’s gaze. They nodded to each other. Miller was the first to turn away.

The equipment bay was part warehouse, part bank vault, designed by someone more concerned with conserving space than getting things out efficiently. The lights—recessed white LEDs—gave the gray walls a sterile cast. Bare stone echoed every voice and footfall. Banks of ammunition and firearms, evidence bags and test panels, spare servers and replacement uniforms lined the walls and filled most of the interior space. The riot gear was in a side room, in gray steel lockers with high-security electronic locks. The standard outfit consisted of high-impact plastic shields, electric batons, shin guards, bullet-resistant chest and thigh armor, and helmets with reinforced face guards—all of it designed to make a handful of station security into an intimidating, inhuman force.

Miller keyed in his access code. The seals released; the lockers opened.

“Well,” Miller said conversationally. “Fuck me.”

The lockers were empty, gray coffins with the corpses all gone. Across the room, he heard one of the other squads shouting in outrage. Miller systematically opened every riot control locker he could get to. All of them were the same. Shaddid appeared at his side, her face pale with rage.

“What’s plan B?” Miller asked.

Shaddid spat on the floor, then closed her eyes. They shifted under her lids like she was dreaming. Two long breaths later, they opened.

“Check the SWAT lockers. There should be enough in there to outfit two people in each squad.”

“Snipers?” Miller said.

“You have a better idea, Detective?” Shaddid said, leaning on the last word.

Miller raised his hands in surrender. Riot gear was meant to intimidate and control. SWAT gear was made to kill with the greatest efficiency possible. Seemed their mandate had just changed.

On any given day, a thousand ships might be docked on Ceres Station, and activity there rarely slowed and never stopped. Each sector could accommodate twenty ships, the traffic of humanity and cargo, transport vans, mesocranes, and industrial forklifts, and his squad was responsible for twenty sectors.

The air stank of refrigerant and oil. The gravity was slightly above 0.3 g, station spin alone lending the place a sense of oppression and danger. Miller didn’t like the port. Having vacuum so close under his feet made him nervous. Passing the dockworkers and transport crews, he didn’t know whether to scowl or smile. He was here to scare people into behaving and also to reassure them that everything was under control. After the first three sectors, he settled on the smile. It was the kind of lie he was better at.

They had just reached the junction of sectors nineteen and twenty when they heard screaming. Miller pulled his hand terminal out of his pocket, connected to the central surveillance network, and called up the security camera array. It took a few seconds to find it: a mob of fifty or sixty civilians stretching almost all the way across the tunnel, traffic blocked on both sides. There were weapons being waved over heads. Knives, clubs. At least two pistols. Fists pumped in the air. And at the center of the crowd, a huge shirtless man was beating someone to death.

“Showtime,” Miller said, waving his squad forward at a run.

He was still a hundred meters from the turn that would take them to the clot of human violence when he saw the shirtless man knock his victim to the ground, then stomp on her neck. The head twisted sideways at an angle that didn’t leave any question. Miller slowed his team to a brisk walk. Arresting the murderer while surrounded by a crowd of his friends would be tough enough without being winded.

There was blood in the water now. Miller could sense it. The mob was going to turn out. To the station, to the ships. If the people started joining the chaos… what path would it be likely to take? There was a

brothel one level up from there and half a kilometer anti-spinward that catered to inner planet types. The tariff inspector for sector twenty-one was married to a girl from Luna and had bragged about it maybe once too often.

There were too many targets, Miller thought even as he motioned his snipers to spread out. He was trying to reason with a fire. Stop it here, and no one else got killed.

In his imagination, Candace crossed her arms and said, *What's plan B?*

The outer edge of the mob raised the alarm well before Miller reached it. The surge of bodies and threats shifted. Miller tipped back his hat. Men, women. Dark skin, pale, golden brown, and all with the long, thin build of Belters, all with the square-mouthed angry gape of chimpanzees at war.

"Let me take a couple of them down, sir," Gelbfish said from his terminal. "Put the fear of God into them."

"We'll get there," Miller said, smiling at the angry mob. "We'll get there."

The face he expected floated to the front. Shirtless. The big man, blood covering his hands and splattered on his cheek. The seed crystal of the riot.

"That one?" Gelbfish asked, and Miller knew that a tiny infrared dot was painting Shirtless' forehead even as he glowered at Miller and the uniforms behind him.

"No," Miller said. "That'll only set the rest of them off."

"So what do we do?" Brown said.

It was a hell of a question.

"Sir," Gelbfish said. "The big fucker's got an OPA tattoo on his left shoulder."

"Well," Miller said, "if you do have to shoot him, start there."

He stepped forward, tying his terminal into the local system, overriding the alert. When he spoke, his voice boomed from the overhead speakers.

"This is Detective Miller. Unless you all want to be locked up as accessories to murder, I suggest you disperse now." Muting the microphone in his terminal, he said to Shirtless, "Not you, big fella. Move a muscle and we shoot you."

Someone in the crowd threw a wrench, the silver metal arcing low through the air toward Miller's head. He almost stepped out of the way, but the handle caught him across the ear. His head filled with the deep sound of bells, and the wet of blood tracked down his neck.

"Hold fire," Miller shouted. "Hold your fire."

The crowd laughed, as if he'd been talking to them. Idiots. Shirtless, emboldened, strode forward. The steroids had distended his thighs so

badly that he waddled. Miller turned the mic on his terminal back on. If the crowd was watching them face each other down, they weren't breaking things. It wasn't spreading. Not yet.

"So. Friend. You only kick helpless people to death, or can anybody join in?" Miller asked, his voice conversational but echoing out of the dock speakers like a pronouncement from God.

"The fuck you barking, Earth dog?" Shirtless said.

"Earth?" Miller said, chuckling. "I look like I grew up in a gravity well to you? I was born on this rock."

"Inners kibble you, bitch," Shirtless said. "You they dog."

"You think?"

"Fuckin' dui," Shirtless said. *Fucking true.* He flexed his pectorals. Miller suppressed the urge to laugh.

"So killing that poor bastard was for the good of the station?" Miller said. "The good of the Belt? Don't be a chump, kid. They're playing you. They want you to act like a bunch of stupid riotboys so they have a reason to shut this place down."

"*Schrauben sie sie weibchen,*" Shirtless said in Belter-inflected gutter German, leaning forward.

Okay, second time I've been called a bitch, Miller thought.

"Kneecap him," Miller said. Shirtless' legs blew out in twin sprays of crimson and he went down howling. Miller walked past his writhing body, stepping toward the mob.

"You're taking your orders from this *pendejo*?" he said. "Listen to me, we all know what's coming. We know dance starting, now, like pow, right? They fucked tu agua, and we all know the answer. Out an airlock, no?"

He could see it in their faces: the sudden fear of the snipers, then the confusion. He pressed on, not giving them time to think. He switched back to the lower-level lingo, the language of education, authority.

"You know what Mars wants? They want you, doing this. They want this piece of shit here to make sure that everyone looks at Belters and thinks we're a bunch of psychopaths who tear up their own station. They want to tell themselves we're just like them. Well, we aren't. We're Belters, and we take care of our own."

He picked a man at the edge of the mob. Not as pumped as Shirtless, but big. He had an OPA split circle on his arm.

"You," Miller said. "You want to fight for the Belt?"

"Dui," the man said.

"I bet you do. He did too," Miller said, jerking a thumb back at Shirtless. "But now he's a cripple, and he's going down for murder. So we've already lost one. You see? They're turning us against each other. Can't let them do that. Every one of you I have to arrest or

cripple or kill, that's one less we have when the day comes. And it's coming. But it's not now. You understand?"

The OPA man scowled. The mob drew back from him, making space. Miller could feel it like a current against him. It was shifting.

"Day's coming, hombre," the OPA man said. "You know your side?"

The tone was a threat, but there was no power behind it. Miller took a slow breath. It was over.

"Always the side of the angels," he said. "Why don't you all go back to work? Show's over here, and we've all got plenty that needs doing."

Momentum broken, the mob fell apart. First one and two peeling off from the edges, and then the whole knot untying itself at once. Five minutes after Miller had arrived, the only signs that anything had happened were Shirtless mewling in a pool of his own blood, the wound on Miller's ear, and the body of the woman fifty good citizens had stood by and watched be beaten to death. She was short and wearing the flight suit of a Martian freight line.

Only one dead. Makes it a good night, Miller thought sourly.

He went to the fallen man. The OPA tattoo was smeared red. Miller knelt.

"Friend," he said. "You are under arrest for the murder of that lady over there, whoever the hell she is. You are not required to participate in questioning without the presence of an attorney or union representative, and if you so much as look at me wrong, I'll space you. Do we understand each other?"

From the look in the man's eyes, Miller knew they did.

Chapter Seven: Holden

Holden could drink coffee at half a g. Actually sit and hold a mug under his nose and let the aroma drift up. Sip it slowly and not burn his tongue. Drinking coffee was one of the activities that didn't make the transition to microgravity well, but at half a g, it was fine.

So he sat and tried very hard to think about coffee and gravity in the silence of the *Knight*'s tiny galley. Even the normally talkative Alex was quiet. Amos had set his big handgun on the table and was staring at it with frightening concentration. Shed was asleep. Naomi was sitting across the room, drinking tea and keeping one eye on the wall panel next to her. She'd routed ops to it.

As long as he kept his mind on his coffee, he didn't have to think about Ade giving one last gasp of fear and then turning into a glowing vapor.

Alex ruined it by speaking.

"At some point, we need to decide where we're goin'," he said.

Holden nodded, took a sip of his coffee, and closed his eyes. His muscles vibrated like plucked strings, and his peripheral vision was dappled with points of imaginary light. The first twinges of the post-juice crash were starting, and it was going to be a bad one. He wanted to enjoy these last few moments before the pain hit.

"He's right, Jim," Naomi said. "We can't just fly in a big circle at half a g forever."

Holden didn't open his eyes. The darkness behind his lids was bright and active and mildly nauseating.

"We aren't waiting forever," he said. "We're waiting fifty minutes for Saturn Station to call me back and tell me what to do with their ship. The *Knight* is still P and K property. We're still employees. You wanted me to call for help, I called for help. Now we are waiting to see what that looks like."

"Shouldn't we start flying toward Saturn Station, then, Boss?" Amos asked, directing his question at Naomi.

Alex snorted.

"Not on the *Knight*'s engine. Even if we had the fuel for that trip, which we don't, I don't want to sit in this can for the next three months," he said. "Naw, if we're goin' somewhere, it's gotta be the Belt or Jupiter. We're as close to exactly between 'em as you can get."

"I vote we continue on to Ceres," Naomi said. "P and K has offices there. We don't know anyone in the Jupiter complex."

Without opening his eyes, Holden shook his head.

"No, we wait for them to call us back."

Naomi made an exasperated sound. It was funny, he thought, how you could make someone's voice out from the smallest sounds. A cough or a sigh. Or the little gasp right before she died.

Holden sat up and opened his eyes. He placed his coffee mug on the table carefully, with hands that were starting to palsy.

"I don't want to fly sunward to Ceres, because that's the direction the torpedo ship went, and your point about chasing them is well taken, Naomi. I don't want to fly out to Jupiter, because we only have the fuel for one trip, and once we fly that direction for a while, we're locked in. We are sitting here and drinking coffee because I need to make a decision, and P and K gets a say in that decision. So we wait for them to answer, and then I decide."

Holden got up slowly, carefully, and began moving toward the crew ladder. "I'm going to crash for a few minutes, let the worst of the shakes wear off. If P and K calls, let me know."

Holden popped sedative tabs—thin, bitter pills with an aftertaste like bread mold—but he didn't sleep. Over and over, McDowell placed a hand on his arm and called him Jim. Becca laughed and cursed like a sailor. Cameron bragged about his prowess on the ice.

Ade gasped.

Holden had flown the Ceres-to-Saturn circuit on the *Canterbury* nine times. Two round-trips a year, for almost five years. Most of the crew had been there the entire time. Flying on the *Cant* might be the bottom of the barrel, but that meant there was nowhere else to go. People stayed, made the ship their home. After the near-constant duty transfers of the navy, he appreciated stability. Made it his home too. McDowell said something he couldn't quite make out. The *Cant* groaned like she was under a hard burn.

Ade smiled and winked at him.

The worst leg cramp in history hit every muscle in his body at once. Holden bit down hard on his rubber mouth guard, screaming. The pain brought an oblivion that was almost a relief. His mind shut off, drowned out by the needs of his body. Fortunately or not, the drugs started to kick in. His muscles unknotted. His nerves stopped screaming, and consciousness returned like a reluctant schoolboy. His jaw ached as he pulled out the guard. He'd worn toothmarks in the rubber.

In the dim blue cabin light, he thought about the kind of man who

followed an order to kill a civilian ship.

He'd done some things in the navy that had kept him awake nights. He'd followed some orders he vehemently disagreed with. But to lock on to a civilian ship with fifty people aboard and press the button that launched six nuclear weapons? He would have refused. If his commanding officer had insisted, he'd have declared it an illegal order and demanded that the executive officer take control of the ship and arrest the captain. They'd have had to shoot him to get him away from the weapon post.

He'd known the sort of people who would have followed the order, though. He told himself that they were sociopaths and animals, no better than pirates who'd board your ship, strip your engine, and take your air. That they weren't human.

But even as he nursed his hatred, drug-hazed rage offering its nihilistic comforts, he couldn't believe they were idiots. The itch at the back of his head was still *Why? What does anyone gain from killing an ice hauler? Who gets paid? Someone always gets paid.*

I'm going to find you. I'm going to find you and end you. But before I do, I am going to make you explain.

The second wave of pharmaceuticals exploded in his bloodstream. He was hot and limp, his veins filled with syrup. Just before the tabs finally knocked him out, Ade smiled and winked.

And blew away like dust.

The comm beeped at him. Naomi's voice said, "Jim, the P and K response finally came in. Want me to send it down there?"

Holden struggled to make sense of the words. Blinked. Something was wrong with his bunk. With the ship. Slowly, he remembered.

"Jim?"

"No," he said. "I want to watch it up in ops with you. How long was I out?"

"Three hours," she said.

"Jesus. They took their sweet time getting back to us, didn't they?"

Holden rolled out of his couch and wiped off the crust that held his eyelashes together. He'd been weeping in his sleep. He told himself it was from the juice crash. The deep ache in his chest was only stressed cartilage.

What were you doing for three hours before you called us back? he wondered.

Naomi waited for him at the comm station, a man's face frozen mid-word on the screen in front of her. He seemed familiar.

"That isn't the operations manager."

"Nope. It's the P and K legal counsel on Saturn Station. The one who gave that speech after the crackdown on supply pilfering?" Naomi said. " 'Stealing from us is stealing from you.' That one."

"Lawyer," Holden said with a grimace. "This is going to be bad news, then."

Naomi restarted the message. The lawyer sprang into motion.

"James Holden, this is Wallace Fitz calling from Saturn Station. We've received your request for help, and your report of the incident. We've also received your broadcast accusing Mars of destroying the *Canterbury*. This was, to say the least, ill advised. The Martian representative on Saturn Station was in my office not five minutes after your broadcast was received, and the MCR is quite upset by what they view as unfounded accusations of piracy by their government.

"To further investigate this matter, and to aid in discovering the true wrongdoers, if any, the MCRN is dispatching one of their ships from the Jupiter system to pick you up. The MCRN *Donnager* is the name of this vessel. Your orders from P and K are as follows: You will fly at best possible speed to the Jupiter system. You will cooperate fully with instructions given you by the MCRN *Donnager,* or by any officer of the Martian Congressional Republic Navy. You will assist the MCRN in their investigation into the destruction of the *Canterbury*. You will *refrain* from any further broadcasting except to us or the *Donnager*.

"If you fail to follow these instructions from the company and from the government of Mars, your contract with P and K will be terminated, and you will be considered in illegal possession of a P and K shuttle craft. We will then prosecute you to the fullest extent of the law.

"Wallace Fitz out."

Holden frowned at the monitor, then shook his head.

"I never said Mars did it."

"You sort of did," Naomi replied.

"I didn't say anything that wasn't entirely factual and backed up by the data I transmitted, and I engaged in no speculation about those facts."

"So," Naomi said. "What do we do?"

“No fucking way,” Amos said. “No *fucking* way.”

The galley was a small space. The five of them filled it uncomfortably. The gray laminate walls showed whorls of bright scrapes where mold had grown once and been cleaned off with microwaves and steel wool. Shed sat with his back against the wall, Naomi across the table. Alex stood in the doorway. Amos had started pacing along the back—two fast paces, then a turn—before the lawyer had finished his first sentence.

“I’m not happy about it either. But that’s the word from the home office,” Holden said, pointing at the galley’s display screen. “Didn’t mean to get you guys in trouble.”

“No problem, Holden. I still think you did the right thing,” Shed replied, running one hand through his limp blond hair. “So what do you think the Martians will do with us?”

“I’m thinking pull our fucking toes off until Holden goes back on the radio and says it wasn’t them,” Amos said. “What in the holy hell is this? They attacked us, and now we’re supposed to *cooperate?* They killed the captain!”

“Amos,” Holden said.

“Sorry, Holden. Captain,” Amos said. “But Jesus *wept.* We’re getting fucked here and not the nice way. We’re not gonna do this, are we?”

“I don’t want to disappear into some Martian prison ship forever,” Holden said. “The way I see it, we have two options. Either we go along with this, which is basically throwing ourselves on their mercy. Or we run, try to make it to the Belt and hide.”

“I’m voting for the Belt,” Naomi said, her arms crossed. Amos raised a hand, seconding the motion. Shed slowly raised his own.

Alex shook his head.

“I know the *Donnager,*” he said. “She’s not some rock hopper. She’s the flagship for the MCRN’s Jupiter fleet. Battleship. Quarter million tons of bad news. You ever serve on a ship that size?”

“No. I wasn’t on anything bigger than a destroyer,” Holden replied.

“I served on the *Bandon,* with the home fleet. We can’t go anywhere that a ship like that can’t find us. She’s got four main engines, each one bigger than our whole ship. She’s designed for long periods at high g with every sailor on board juiced to the gills. We can’t run, sir, and even if we did, her sensor package could track a golf ball and hit it with a torpedo from half the solar system away.”

“Oh, fuck that, sir,” Amos said, standing up. “These Martian needle dicks blew up the *Cant*! I say run. At least make it hard for them.”

Naomi put one hand on Amos’ forearm, and the big mechanic paused, shook his head, and sat down. The galley was silent. Holden wondered if McDowell had ever had to make a call like this, and what the old man would have done.

“Jim, this is your decision,” she said, but her eyes were hard. *No, what you are going to do is get the remaining four members of your crew to safety. And that’s all.*

Holden nodded and tapped his fingers against his lips.

“P and K doesn’t have our back on this one. We probably can’t get away, but I don’t want to disappear either,” Holden said. And then: “I think we go, but we don’t go quietly. Why don’t we go disobey the spirit of an order?”

Naomi finished working on the comm panel, her hair now floating around her like a black cloud in the zero g.

“Okay, Jim, I’m dumping every watt into the comm array. They’ll be getting this loud and clear all the way out to Titania,” she said.

Holden reached up to run one hand through his sweat-plastered hair. In the null gravity, that just made it stick straight out in every direction. He zipped up his flight suit and pressed the record button.

“This is James Holden, formerly of the *Canterbury,* now on the shuttle *Knight.* We are cooperating with an investigation into who destroyed the *Canterbury* and, as part of that cooperation, are agreeing to be taken aboard your ship, the MCRN *Donnager.* We hope that this cooperation means that we will not be held prisoner or harmed. Any such action would only serve to reinforce the idea that the *Canterbury* was destroyed by a Martian vessel. James Holden out.”

Holden leaned back. “Naomi, send that out broadband.”

“That’s a dirty trick, Boss,” said Alex. “Pretty hard to disappear us now.”

“I believe in the ideal of the transparent society, Mr. Kamal,” said Holden. Alex grinned, pushed off, and floated down the gangway. Naomi tapped the comm panel, making a small, satisfied sound in the back of her throat.

“Naomi,” Holden said. She turned, her hair waving lazily, like they were both drowning. “If this goes badly, I need you… I need you to… ”

“Throw you to the wolves,” she said. “Blame everything on you and get the others back to Saturn Station safely.”

“Yeah,” Holden said. “Don’t play the hero.”

She let the words hang in the air until the last of the irony leeched out of them.

“Hadn’t crossed my mind, sir,” she said.

"*Knight,* this is Captain Theresa Yao of the MCRN *Donnager,*" said the severe-looking woman on the comm screen. "Message received. Please refrain from further general broadcasts. My navigator will be sending course information shortly. Follow that course exactly. Yao out."

Alex laughed.

"I think you pissed her off," he said. "Got the course info. They'll be picking us up in thirteen days. Give her time to really stew on it."

"Thirteen days before I'm clapped in irons and have needles shoved under my fingernails," Holden sighed, leaning back in his couch. "Well, best begin our flight toward imprisonment and torture. You may lock in the transmitted course, Mr. Kamal."

"Roger that, Cap—Huh," said Alex.

"A problem?"

"Well, the *Knight* just did her pre-burn sweep for collision objects," Alex said. "And we have six Belt objects on an intercept course."

"Belt objects?"

"Fast contacts with no transponder signal," Alex replied. "Ships, but flyin' dark. They'll catch us just about two days before the *Donnager* does."

Holden pulled up the display. Six small signatures, yellow-orange shifting toward red. Heavy burn.

"Well," Holden said to the screen. "And who the hell are *you*?"

Chapter Eight: Miller

Aggression against the Belt is what Earth and Mars survive on. Our weakness is their strength," the masked woman said from Miller's terminal screen. The split circle of the OPA draped behind her, like something painted on a sheet. "Don't be afraid of them. Their only power is your fear."

"Well, that and a hundred or so gunships," Havelock said.

"From what I hear," Miller said, "if you clap your hands and say you believe, they can't shoot you."

"Have to try that sometime."

"We must rise up!" the woman said, her voice growing shrill. "We have to take our destiny before it is taken from us! Remember the *Canterbury*!"

Miller shut the viewer down and leaned back in his chair. The station was at its change-of-shift surge, voices raised one over the other as the previous round of cops brought the incoming ones up to speed. The smell of fresh coffee competed with cigarette smoke.

"There's maybe a dozen like her," Havelock said, nodding toward the dead terminal screen. "She's my favorite, though. There're times I swear she's actually foaming at the mouth."

"How many more files?" Miller asked, and his partner shrugged.

"Two, three hundred," Havelock said, and took a drag on his cigarette. He'd started smoking again. "Every few hours, there's a new one. They aren't coming from one place. Sometimes they're broadcast on the radio. Sometimes the files show up on public partitions. Orlan found some guys at a portside bar passing out those little VR squids like they were pamphlets."

"She bust them?"

"No," Havelock said as if it was no big deal.

A week had passed since James Holden, self-appointed martyr, had proudly announced that he and his crew were going to go talk to someone from the Martian navy instead of just slinging shit and implications. The footage of the *Canterbury*'s death was everywhere, debates raging over every frame. The log files that documented the incident were perfectly legitimate, or they were obviously doctored. The torpedoes that had slaughtered the hauler were nukes or standard pirate fare that breached the drive by mistake, or it was all artifice lifted from old stock footage to cover up what had really killed the *Cant.*

The riots had lasted for three days on and off, like a fire hot enough to reignite every time the air pumped back in. The administrative

offices reopened under heavy security, but they reopened. The ports fell behind, but they were catching up. The shirtless bastard who Miller had ordered shot was in the Star Helix detainment infirmary, getting new knees, filling out protests against Miller, and preparing for his murder trial.

Six hundred cubic meters of nitrogen had gone missing from a warehouse in sector fifteen. An unlicensed whore had been beaten up and locked in a storage unit; as soon as she was done giving evidence about her attackers, she'd be arrested. They'd caught the kids who'd been breaking the surveillance cameras on level sixteen. Superficially, everything was business as usual.

Only superficially.

When Miller had started working homicide, one of the things that had struck him was the surreal calm of the victims' families. People who had just lost wives, husbands, children, and lovers. People whose lives had just been branded by violence. More often than not, they were calmly offering drinks and answering questions, making the detectives feel welcome. A civilian coming in unaware might have mistaken them for whole. It was only in the careful way they held themselves and the extra quarter second it took their eyes to focus that Miller could see how deep the damage was.

Ceres Station was holding itself carefully. Its eyes were taking a quarter second longer to focus. Middle-class people—storekeepers, maintenance workers, computer techs—were avoiding him on the tube the way petty criminals did. Conversations died when Miller came near. In the station, the sense of being under siege was growing. A month earlier, Miller and Havelock, Cobb and Richter, and the rest had been the steadying hand of the law. Now they were employees of an Earth-based security contractor.

The difference was subtle, but it was deep. It made him want to stand taller, to show with his body that he was a Belter. That he belonged there. It made him want to win people's good opinion back. Let by a bunch of guys passing out virtual reality propaganda with a warning, maybe.

It wasn't a smart impulse.

"What've we got on the board?" Miller asked.

"Two burglaries that look like that same ring," Havelock said. "That domestic dispute from last week still needs the report closed up. There was a pretty good assault over by Nakanesh Import Consortium, but Shaddid was talking to Dyson and Patel about that, so it's probably spoken for already."

"So you want… "

Havelock looked up and out to cover the fact that he was looking away. It was something he'd been doing more often since things had

gone to shit.

"We've really got to get the reports done," Havelock said. "Not just the domestic. There're four or five folders that are only still open because they need to be crossed and dotted."

"Yeah," Miller said.

Since the riots, he'd watched everyone in a bar get served before Havelock. He'd seen how the other cops from Shaddid down went out of their way to reassure Miller that *he* was one of the good guys, a tacit apology for saddling him with an Earther. And he'd seen Havelock see it too.

It made Miller want to protect the man, to let Havelock spend his days in the safety of paperwork and station house coffee. Help the man pretend that he wasn't hated for the gravity he'd grown up in.

That wasn't a smart impulse either.

"What about your bullshit case?" Havelock asked.

"What?"

Havelock held up a folder. The Julie Mao case. The kidnap job. The sideshow. Miller nodded and rubbed his eyes. Someone at the front of the station house yelped. Someone else laughed.

"Yeah, no," Miller said. "Haven't touched it."

Havelock grinned and held it out to him. Miller accepted the file, flipped it open. The eighteen-year-old grinned out at him with perfect teeth.

"I don't want to saddle you with all the desk driving," Miller said.

"Hey, you're not the one that kept me off that one. That was Shaddid's call. And anyway… it's just paperwork. Never killed anyone. You feel guilty about it, you can buy me a beer after work."

Miller tapped the case against the corner of his desk, the small impacts settling the contents against the folder's spine.

"Right," he said. "I'll go do some follow-up on the bullshit. I'll be back by lunch, write something up to keep the boss happy."

"I'll be here," Havelock said. Then, as Miller rose: "Hey. Look. I didn't want to say anything until I was sure, but I also don't want you to hear it someplace else… "

"Put in for a transfer?" Miller said.

"Yeah. Talked to some of those Protogen contractors that passed through. They say their Ganymede office is looking for a new lead investigator. And I thought… " Havelock shrugged.

"It's a good move," Miller said.

"Just want to go someplace with a sky, even if you look at it through domes," Havelock said, and all the bluff masculinity of police work couldn't keep the wistfulness out of his voice.

"It's a good move," Miller said again.

Juliette Andromeda Mao's hole was in the ninth level of a fourteen-tiered tunnel near the port. The great inverted V was almost half a kilometer wide at the top, and no more than a standard tube width at the bottom, the retrofit of one of a dozen reaction mass chambers from the years before the asteroid had been given its false gravity. Now thousands of cheap holes burrowed into the walls, hundreds on each level, heading straight back like shotgun shacks. Kids played on the terraced streets, shrieking and laughing at nothing. Someone at the bottom was flying a kite in the constant gentle spin breeze, the bright Mylar diamond swerving and bucking in the microturbulence. Miller checked his terminal against the numbers painted on the wall. *5151-I.* Home sweet home to the poor little rich girl.

He keyed his override, and the dirty green door popped its seals and let him pass.

The hole canted up into the body of the station. Three small rooms: general living space at the front, then a bedroom hardly larger than the cot it contained, then a stall with shower, toilet, and half sink all within elbow distance. It was a standard design. He'd seen it a thousand times.

Miller stood for a minute, not looking at anything in particular, listening to the reassuring hiss of air cycling through ductwork. He reserved judgment, waiting as the back of his head built an impression of the place and, through it, of the girl who'd lived there.

Spartan was the wrong word. The place was simple, yes. The only decorations were a small framed watercolor of a slightly abstracted woman's face over the table in the front room and a cluster of playing-card-sized plaques over the cot in the bedroom. He leaned close to read the small script. A formal award granting Julie Mao—not Juliette—purple belt status by the Ceres Center for Jiu Jitsu. Another stepping her up to brown belt. They were two years apart. Tough school, then. He put his fingers on the empty space on the wall where one for black could go. There was none of the affectation—no stylized throwing stars or imitation swords. Just a small acknowledgment that Julie Mao had done what she had done. He gave her points for that.

The drawers had two changes of clothes, one of heavy canvas and denim and one of blue linen with a silk scarf. One for work, one for play. It was less than Miller owned, and he was hardly a clotheshorse.

With her socks and underwear was a wide armband with the split circle of the OPA. Not a surprise, for a girl who'd turned her back on

wealth and privilege to live in a dump like this. The refrigerator had two takeaway boxes filled with spoiled food and a bottle of local beer.

Miller hesitated, then took the beer. He sat at the table and pulled up the hole's built-in terminal. True to Shaddid's word, Julie's partition opened to Miller's password.

The custom background was a racing pinnace. The interface was customized in small, legible iconography. Communication, entertainment, work, personal. *Elegant.* That was the word. Not Spartan, but elegant.

He paged quickly through her professional files, letting his mind take in an overview, just as he had with the whole living space. There would be time for rigor, and a first impression was usually more useful than an encyclopedia. She had training videos on several different light transport craft. Some political archives, but nothing that raised a flag. A scanned volume of poetry by some of the first settlers in the Belt.

He shifted to her personal correspondence. It was all kept as neat and controlled as a Belter's. All incoming messages were filtered to subfolders. Work, Personal, Broadcast, Shopping. He popped open Broadcast. Two or three hundred political newsfeeds, discussion group digests, bulletins and announcements. A few had been viewed here and there, but nothing with any sort of religious observation. Julie was the kind of woman who would sacrifice for a cause, but not the kind who'd take joy in reading the propaganda. Miller filed that away.

Shopping was a long tracking of simple merchant messages. Some receipts, some announcements, some requests for goods and services. A cancellation for a Belt-based singles circle caught his eye. Miller re-sorted for related correspondence. Julie had signed up for the "low g, low pressure" dating service in February of the previous year and canceled in June without having used it.

The Personal folder was more diverse. At a rough guess there were sixty or seventy subfolders broken down by name. Some were people —Sascha Lloyd-Navarro, Ehren Michaels. Others were private notations—Sparring Circle, OPA.

Bullshit Guilt Trips.

"Well, this could be interesting," he said to the empty hole.

Fifty messages dating back five years, all marked as originating at the Mao-Kwikowski Mercantile stations in the Belt and on Luna. Unlike the political tracts, all but one had been opened.

Miller took a pull from the beer and considered the most recent two messages. The most recent, still unread, was from JPM. Jules-Pierre Mao, at a guess. The one immediately before it showed three drafted replies, none of them sent. It was from Ariadne. The mother.

There was always an element of voyeurism in being a detective. It

was legal for him to be here, poking through the private life of a woman he'd never met. It was part of his legitimate investigation to know that she was lonely, that the only toiletries in her bathroom were her own. That she was proud. No one would have any complaints to make, or at least any that carried repercussions for his job, if he read every private message on her partition. Drinking her beer was the most ethically suspect thing he'd done since he'd come in.

And still he hesitated for a few seconds before opening the second-to-last message.

The screen shifted. On better equipment, it would have been indistinguishable from ink on paper, but Julie's cheap system shuddered at the thinnest lines and leaked a soft glow at the left edge. The handwriting was delicate and legible, either done with a calligraphic software good enough to vary letter shape and line width, or else handwritten.

Sweetheart:

I hope everything's going well for you. I wish you would write to me on your own sometimes. I feel like I have to put in a request in triplicate just to hear how my own daughter is doing. I know this adventure of yours is all about freedom and self-reliance, but surely there's still room in there to be considerate.

I wanted to get in touch with you especially because your father is going through one of his consolidation phases again, and we're thinking of selling the Razorback. I know it was important to you once, but I suppose we've all given up on your racing again. It's just racking up storage fees now, and there's no call to be sentimental.

It was signed with the flowing initials *AM.*

Miller considered the words. Somehow he'd expected the parental extortions of the very rich to be more subtle. *If you don't do as we say, we'll get rid of your toys. If you don't write. If you don't come home. If you don't love us.*

Miller opened the first incomplete draft.

Mother, if that's what you call yourself:

Thank you so much for dropping yet another turd onto my day. I can't believe how selfish and petty and crude you are. I can't believe you sleep at night or that you ever thought I could

Miller skimmed the rest. The tone seemed consistent. The second draft reply was dated two days later. He skipped to it.

Mom:

I'm sorry we've been so estranged these last few years. I know it's been hard for you and for Daddy. I hope you can see that the decisions I've made were never meant to hurt either of you.

About the Razorback, I wish you'd reconsider. She's my first boat, and I

It stopped there. Miller leaned back.

"Steady on, kid," he said to the imaginary Julie, then opened the last draft.

Ariadne:

Do what you have to.

Julie

Miller laughed and raised his bottle to the screen in toast. They'd known how to hit her where it hurt, and Julie had taken the blow. If he ever caught her and shipped her back, it was going to be a bad day for both of them. All of them.

He finished the beer, dropped the bottle into the recycling chute, and opened the last message. He more than half dreaded learning the final fate of the *Razorback,* but it was his job to know as much as he could.

Julie:

This is not a joke. This is not one of your mother's drama fits. I have solid information that the Belt is about to be a very unsafe place. Whatever differences we have we can work out later.

FOR YOUR OWN SAFETY COME HOME NOW.

Miller frowned. The air recycler hummed. Outside, the local kids whistled high and loud. He tapped the screen, closing the last Bullshit Guilt Trip message, then opened it again.

It had been sent from Luna, two weeks before James Holden and the *Canterbury* raised the specter of war between Mars and the Belt.

This sideshow was getting interesting.

Chapter Nine: Holden

The ships are still not responding," Naomi said, punching a key sequence on the comm panel.

"I didn't think they would. But I want to show the *Donnager* that we're worried about being followed. It's all covering our asses at this point," Holden said.

Naomi's spine popped as she stretched. Holden pulled a protein bar out of the box in his lap and threw it at her.

"Eat."

She peeled the wrapping off while Amos clambered up the ladder and threw himself into the couch next to her. His coverall was so filthy it shined. Just as with the others, three days on the cramped shuttle hadn't helped his personal hygiene. Holden reached up and scratched his own greasy hair with distaste. The *Knight* was too small for showers, and the zero-g sinks were too small to stick your head in. Amos had solved the hair-washing problem by shaving all of his off. Now he just had a ring of stubble around his bald spot. Somehow, Naomi's hair stayed shiny and mostly oil free. Holden wondered how she did that.

"Toss me some chow, XO," Amos said.

"Captain," Naomi corrected.

Holden threw a protein bar at him too. Amos snatched it from the air, then considered the long, thin package with distaste.

"Goddamn, Boss, I'd give my left nut for food that didn't look like a dildo," Amos said, then tapped his food against Naomi's in mock toast.

"Tell me about our water," Holden said.

"Well, I've been crawling around between hulls all day. I've tightened everything that can be tightened, and slapped epoxy on anything that can't, so we aren't dripping anywhere."

"It'll still be right down to the wire, Jim," Naomi said. "The *Knight*'s recycling systems are crap. She was never intended to process five people's worth of waste back into potables for two weeks."

"Down to the wire, I can handle. We'll just learn to live with each other's stink. I was worried about 'nowhere near enough.' "

"Speaking of which, I'm gonna head to my rack and spray on some more deodorant," Amos said. "After all day crawling in the ship's guts, my stink's even keeping me awake tonight."

Amos swallowed the last of his food and smacked his lips with mock relish, then climbed out of his couch and headed down the crew ladder. Holden took a bite of his own bar. It tasted like greased cardboard.

"What's Shed up to?" he asked. "He's been pretty quiet."

Naomi, frowning, put her half-eaten bar down on the comm panel.

"I wanted to talk to you about that. He's not doing well, Jim. Out of all of us, he's having the hardest time with… what's happened. You and Alex were both navy men. They train you to deal with losing shipmates. Amos has been flying so long this is actually the *third* ship that's gone down under him, if you can believe that."

"And you are made entirely of cast iron and titanium," Holden said, only pretending to joke.

"Not entirely. Eighty, ninety percent. Tops," Naomi said with a half smile. "Seriously, though. I think you should talk to him."

"And say what? I'm no psychiatrist. The navy version of this speech involves duty and honorable sacrifice and avenging fallen comrades. Doesn't work as well when your friends have been murdered for no apparent reason and there's essentially no chance you can do anything about it."

"I didn't say you had to fix him. I said you needed to talk to him."

Holden got up from his couch with a salute.

"Yes, sir," he said. At the ladder he paused. "Again, thank you, Naomi. I'd really—"

"I know. Go be the captain," she said, turning back to her panel and calling up the ship ops screen. "I'll keep waving at the neighbors."

Holden found Shed in the *Knight*'s tiny sick bay. Really more a sick closet. Other than a reinforced cot, the cabinets of supplies, and a half dozen pieces of wall-mounted equipment, there was just enough room for one stool stuck to the floor on magnetic feet. Shed was sitting on it.

"Hey, buddy, mind if I come in?" Holden asked. *Did I actually say 'Hey, buddy'?*

Shed shrugged and pulled up an inventory screen on the wall panel, opening various drawers and staring at the contents. Pretending he'd been in the middle of something.

"Look, Shed. This thing with the *Canterbury* has really hit everyone hard, and you've—" Holden said. Shed turned, holding up a white squeeze tube.

"Three percent acetic acid solution. Didn't realize we had this out here. The *Cant*'s run out, and I've got three people with GW who could really use it. Why'd they put it on the *Knight,* I wonder," Shed said.

"GW?" was all Holden could think to reply.

"Genital warts. Acetic acid solution is the treatment for any visible warts. Burns 'em off. Hurts like hell, but it does the job. No reason to keep it on the shuttle. Medical inventory is always so messed up."

Holden opened his mouth to speak, found nothing to say, and closed it again.

"We've got acetic acid cream," Shed said, his voice increasingly shrill, "but no elemcet for pain. Which do you think you'd need more on a rescue shuttle? If we'd found anyone on that wreck with a bad case of GW, we'd have been set. A broken bone? You're out of luck. Just suck it up."

"Look, Shed," Holden said, trying to break in.

"Oh, and look at this. No coagulant booster. What the hell? Hey, no chance anyone on a rescue mission could, you know, start *bleeding*. Catch a case of red bumps on your crank, sure, but bleeding? No way! I mean, we've got four cases of syphilis on the *Cant* right now. One of the oldest diseases in the book, and we still can't get rid of it. I tell those guys, 'The hookers on Saturn Station are banging every ice bucker on the circuit, so put the glove on,' but do they listen? No. So here we are with syphilis and not enough ciprofloxacin."

Holden felt his jaw slide forward. He gripped the side of the hatch and leaned into the room.

"Everyone on the *Cant* is dead," Holden said, making each word clear and strong and brutal. "Everyone is dead. No one needs the antibiotics. No one needs wart cream."

Shed stopped talking, and all the air went out of him like he'd been gut punched. He closed the drawers in the supply cabinet and turned off the inventory screen with small precise movements.

"I know," he said in a quiet voice. "I'm not stupid. I just need some time."

"We all do. But we're stuck in this tiny can together. I'll be honest, I came down here because Naomi is worried about you, but now that I'm here, you're freaking me the hell out. That's okay, because I'm the captain now and it's my job. But I can't have you freaking Alex or Amos out. We're ten days from being grabbed by a Martian battleship, and that's scary enough without the doctor falling apart."

"I'm not a doctor, I'm just a tech," Shed said, his voice very small.

"You're *our* doctor, okay? To the four of us here with you on this ship, you're our doctor. If Alex starts having post-traumatic stress episodes and needs meds to keep it together, he'll come to you. If you're down here jabbering about warts, he'll turn around and go back up to the cockpit and just do a really bad job of flying. You want to cry? Do it with all of us. We'll sit together in the galley and get drunk and cry like babies, but we'll do it together where it's safe. No

more hiding down here."

Shed nodded.

"Can we do that?" he said.

"Do what?" Holden asked.

"Get drunk and cry like babies?"

"Hell yes. That is officially on the schedule for tonight. Report to the galley at twenty hundred hours, Mr. Garvey. Bring a cup."

Shed started to reply when the general comm clicked on and Naomi said, "Jim, come back up to ops."

Holden gripped Shed's shoulder for a moment, then left.

In ops, Naomi had the comm screen up again and was speaking to Alex in low tones. The pilot was shaking his head and frowning. A map glowed on her screen.

"What's up?" Holden asked.

"We're getting a tightbeam, Jim. It locked on and started transmitting just a couple minutes ago," Naomi replied.

"From the *Donnager*?" The Martian battleship was the only thing he could think of that might be inside laser communications range.

"No. From the Belt," Naomi said. "And not from Ceres, or Eros, or Pallas either. None of the big stations."

She pointed at a small dot on her display.

"It's coming from here."

"That's empty space," Holden said.

"Nope. Alex checked. It's the site of a big construction project Tycho is working on. Not a lot of detail on it, but radar returns are pretty strong."

"Something out there has a comm array that'll put a dot the size of your anus on us from over three AU away," Alex said.

"Okay, wow, that's impressive. What is our anus-sized dot saying?" Holden asked.

"You'll never believe this," Naomi said, and turned on the playback.

A dark-skinned man with the heavy facial bones of an Earther appeared on the screen. His hair was graying, and his neck was ropy with old muscle. He smiled and said, "Hello, James Holden. My name is Fred Johnson."

Holden hit the pause button.

"This guy looks familiar. Search the ship's database for that name," he said.

Naomi didn't move; she just stared at him with a puzzled look on her face.

"What?" he said.

"That's *Frederick Johnson,*" she said.

"Okay."

"Colonel Frederick Lucius Johnson."

The pause might have been a second; it might have been an hour.

"Jesus," was all Holden could think to say.

The man on the screen had once been among the most decorated officers in the UN military, and ended up one of its most embarrassing failures. To Belters, he was the Earther Sheriff of Nottingham who'd turned into Robin Hood. To Earth, he was the hero who'd fallen from grace.

Fred Johnson started his rise to fame with a series of high-profile captures of Belt pirates during one of the periods of tension between Earth and Mars that seemed to ramp up every few decades and then fade away again. Whenever the system's two superpowers rattled their sabers at each other, crime in the Belt rose. Colonel Johnson—Captain Johnson at the time—and his small wing of three missile frigates destroyed a dozen pirate ships and two major bases in a two-year span. By the time the Coalition had stopped bickering, piracy was actually *down* in the Belt, and Fred Johnson was the name on everyone's lips. He was promoted and given command over the Coalition marine division tasked with policing the Belt, where he continued to serve with distinction.

Until Anderson Station.

A tiny shipping depot almost on the opposite side of the Belt from the major port Ceres, most people, including most Belters, would not have been able to find Anderson Station on a map. Its only importance was as a minor distribution station for water and air in one of the sparsest stretches of the Belt. Fewer than a million Belters got their air from Anderson.

Gustav Marconi, a career Coalition bureaucrat on the station, decided to implement a 3-percent handling surcharge on shipments passing through the station in hopes of raising the bottom line. Less than 5 percent of the Belters buying their air from Anderson were living bottle to mouth, so just under fifty thousand Belters might have to spend one day of each month not breathing. Only a small percentage of those fifty thousand lacked the leeway in their recycling systems to cover this minor shortfall. Of those, only a small portion felt that armed revolt was the correct course.

Which was why of the million affected, only 170 armed Belters came to the station, took over, and threw Marconi out an airlock. They demanded a government guarantee that no further handling surcharges would be added to the price of air and water coming through the station.

The Coalition sent Colonel Johnson.

During the Massacre of Anderson Station, the Belters kept the station cameras rolling, broadcasting to the solar system the entire time. Everyone watched as Coalition marines fought a long, gruesome

corridor-to-corridor battle against men with nothing to lose and no reason to surrender. The Coalition won—it was a foregone conclusion—but it took three days of broadcast slaughter. The iconic image of the video was not one of the fighting, but the last image the station cameras caught before they were cut off: Colonel Johnson in station ops, surrounded by the corpses of the Belters who'd made their last stand there, surveying the carnage with a flat stare and hands limp at his sides.

The UN tried to keep Colonel Johnson's resignation quiet, but he was too much a public figure. The video of the battle dominated the nets for weeks, only displaced when the former Colonel Johnson made a public statement apologizing for the massacre and announcing that the relationship between the Belt and the inner planets was untenable and heading toward ever greater tragedy.

Then he vanished. He was almost forgotten, a footnote in the history of human carnage, until the Pallas colony revolt four years later. This time refinery metalworkers kicked the Coalition governor off station. Instead of a tiny way station with 170 rebels, it was a major Belt rock with more than 150,000 people on it. When the Coalition ordered in the marines, everyone expected a bloodbath.

Colonel Johnson came out of nowhere and talked the metalworkers down; he talked the Coalition commanders into holding back the marines until the station could be handed over peacefully. He spent more than a year negotiating with the Coalition governor to improve working conditions in the refineries. And suddenly, the Butcher of Anderson Station was a Belt hero and an icon.

An icon who was beaming private messages to the *Knight*.

Holden hit the play button, and *that* Fred Johnson said, "Mr. Holden, I think you're being played. Let me say straight out that I am speaking to you as an official representative of the Outer Planets Alliance. I don't know what you've heard, but we aren't all a bunch of cowboys itching for a chance to shoot our way to freedom. I've spent the last ten years working to make life for the Belters better without *anyone* getting shot. I believe in this idea so deeply that I gave up my Earth citizenship when I came out here.

"I tell you that so you'll know how invested I am. I may be the one person in the solar system who wants war the least, and my voice is loud in OPA councils.

"You may have heard some of the broadcasts beating on the war drums and calling for revenge against Mars for what happened to your ship. I've talked to every OPA cell leader I know, and no one's claiming responsibility.

"Someone is working very hard to start a war. If it's Mars, then when you get on that ship, you'll never say another word in public

that isn't fed to you by Martian handlers. I don't want to think it *is* Mars. I can't see how they would get anything out of a war. So my hope is that even after the *Donnager* picks you up, you can still be a player in what follows.

"I am sending you a keyword. Next time you broadcast publicly, use the word *ubiquitous* within the first sentence of the broadcast to signal that you're not being coerced. Don't use it, and I'll assume you are. Either way, I want you to know you have allies in the Belt.

"I don't know who or what you were before, but your voice matters now. If you want to use that voice to make things better, I will do anything I can to help you do it. If you get free, contact me at the address that follows. I think maybe you and I have a lot to talk about.

"Johnson out."

The crew sat in the galley drinking a bottle of ersatz tequila Amos had scrounged from somewhere. Shed was politely sipping from a small cup of it and trying to hide his grimace each time. Alex and Amos drank like sailors: a finger full in the bottom of the cup, tossed back all at once. Alex had a habit of saying "Hooboy!" after each shot. Amos just used a different profanity each time. He was up to his eleventh shot and so far had not repeated himself.

Holden stared at Naomi. She swirled the tequila in her cup and stared back. He found himself wondering what sort of genetic mashup had produced her features. Definitely some African and South American in there. Her last name hinted at Japanese ancestry, which was only barely visible, as a slight epicanthic fold. She'd never be conventionally pretty, but from the right angle she was actually fairly striking.

Shit, I'm drunker than I thought.

To cover, he said, "So… "

"So Colonel Johnson is calling you now. Quite the important man you've become, sir," Naomi replied.

Amos put down his cup with exaggerated care.

"Been meaning to ask about that, sir. Any chance we might take up his offer of help and just head back to the Belt?" he said. "Don't know about you, but with the Martian battleship in front, and the half dozen mystery ships behind, it's starting to feel pretty fuckin' crowded out here."

Alex snorted. "Are you kidding? If we flipped now, we'd be just

about stopped by the time the *Donnager* caught up to us. She's burnin' the furniture to catch us before the Belter ships do. If we start headin' their direction, the *Donnie* might take that as a sign we've switched teams, frag the whole lot of us."

"I agree with Mr. Kamal," Holden said. "We've picked our course and we're going to see it through. I won't be losing Fred's contact information anytime soon. Speaking of which, have you deleted his message yet, Naomi?"

"Yes, sir. Scrubbed it from the ship's memory with steel wool. The Martians will never know he talked to us."

Holden nodded and unzipped his jumpsuit a little further. The galley was starting to feel very hot with five drunk people in it. Naomi raised an eyebrow at his days-old T-shirt. Embarrassed, he zipped back up.

"Those ships don't make any sense to me, Boss," Alex said. "A half dozen ships flyin' kamikaze missions with nukes strapped to their hulls *might* make a dent in a battlewagon like the *Donnie,* but not much else would. She opens up with her point defense network and rail guns, she can create a no-fly zone a thousand klicks across. They could be killin' those six ships with torpedoes already, 'cept I think they're as confused about who they are as we are."

"They'll know they can't catch us before the *Donnager* picks us up," Holden said. "And they can't take her in a fight. So I don't know what they're up to."

Amos poured the last of the tequila into everyone's cups and held his up in a toast.

"I guess we'll fucking find out."

Chapter Ten: Miller

Captain Shaddid tapped the tip of her middle finger against her thumb when she started getting annoyed. It was a small sound, soft as a cat's paws, but ever since Miller first noticed her habit, it had seemed louder. Quiet as it was, it could fill her office.

"Miller," she said, smiling as if she meant it. "We're all on edge these days. These have been hard, hard times."

"Yes, sir," Miller said, lowering his head like a fullback determined to muscle his way through all defenders, "but I think this is important enough to deserve closer—"

"It's a favor for a shareholder," Shaddid said. "Her father got jumpy. There's no reason to think he meant Mars blasting the *Canterbury*. Tariffs are going up again. There was a mine blowout on one of the Red Moon operations. Eros is having trouble with their yeast farm. We don't go through a day without something happening in the Belt that would make a daddy scared for his precious little flower."

"Yes, sir, but the timing—"

Her fingers upped tempo. Miller bit his lips. The cause was lost.

"Don't go chasing conspiracies," Shaddid said. "We've got a full board of crimes we know are real. Politics, war, system-wide cabals of inner planet bad guys searching for ways to screw us over? Not our mandate. Just get me a report that says you're looking, I'll send it back up the line, and we can get back to our jobs."

"Yes, sir."

"Anything else?"

"No, sir."

Shaddid nodded and turned back to her terminal. Miller plucked his hat from the corner of her desk and headed out. One of the station house air filters had gone bad over the weekend, and the replacement gave the rooms a reassuring smell of new plastic and ozone. Miller sat at his desk, fingers laced behind his head, and stared at the light fixture above him. The knot that had tied itself in his gut hadn't loosened up. That was too bad.

"Not so good, then?" Havelock asked.

"Could have gone better."

"She pull the job?"

Miller shook his head. "No, it's still mine. She just wants me to do it half-assed."

"Could be worse. At least you get to find out what happened. And if you maybe spend a little time after hours digging into it just for practice, you know?"

"Yeah," Miller said. "Practice."

Their desks were unnaturally clean, his and Havelock's both. The barrier of paperwork Havelock had created between himself and the station had eroded away, and Miller could tell from his partner's eyes and the way his hands moved that the cop in Havelock wanted to get back into the tunnels. He couldn't tell if it was to prove himself before his transfer went through, or just to break a few heads. Maybe those were two ways of saying the same thing.

Just don't get yourself killed before you get out of here, Miller thought. Aloud, he said, "What have we got?"

"Hardware shop. Sector eight, third level in," Havelock said. "Extortion complaint."

Miller sat for a moment, considering his own reluctance as if it belonged to someone else. It was like Shaddid had given a dog just one bite of fresh meat, then pointed it back toward kibble. The temptation to blow off the hardware shop bloomed, and for a moment he almost gave in. Then he sighed, swung his feet down to the decking, and stood.

"All right, then," he said. "Let's go make the station safe for commerce."

"Words to live by," Havelock said, checking his gun. He'd been doing that a lot more recently.

The shop was an entertainment franchise. Clean white fixtures offering up custom rigs for interactive environments: battle simulations, exploration games, sex. A woman's voice ululated on the sound system, somewhere between an Islamic call to prayer and orgasm with a drumbeat. Half the titles were in Hindi with Chinese and Spanish translations. The other half were English with Hindi as the second language. The clerk was hardly more than a boy. Sixteen, seventeen years old with a weedy black beard he wore like a badge.

"Can I help you?" the boy said, eying Havelock with disdain just short of contempt. Havelock pulled his ID, making sure the kid got a good long look at his gun when he did it.

"We'd like to talk to"—Miller glanced at the complaint form on his terminal screen—"Asher Kamamatsu. He here?"

The manager was a fat man, for a Belter. Taller than Havelock, the man carried fat around his belly and thick muscles through the shoulders, arms, and neck. If Miller squinted, he could see the seventeen-year-old boy he had been under the layers of time and disappointment, and it looked a lot like the clerk out front. The office was almost too small for the three of them and stacked with boxes of pornographic software.

"You catch them?" the manager said.

"No," Miller said. "Still trying to figure out who they are."

“Dammit, I already told you. There’s pictures of them off the store camera. I gave you his fucking name.”

Miller looked at his terminal. The suspect was named Mateo Judd, a dockworker with an unspectacular criminal record.

“You think it’s just him, then,” Miller said. “All right. We’ll just go pick him up, throw him in the can. No reason for us to find out who he’s working for. Probably no one who’ll take it wrong, anyway. My experience with these protection rackets, the purse boys get replaced whenever one goes down. But since you’re sure this guy’s the *whole* problem… ”

The manager’s sour expression told Miller he’d made his point. Havelock, leaning against a stack of boxes marked сиротливые девушки, smiled.

“Why don’t you tell me what he wanted,” Miller said.

“I already told the last cop,” the manager said.

“Tell me.”

“He was selling us a private insurance plan. Hundred a month, same as the last guy.”

“Last guy?” Havelock said. “So this happened before?”

“Sure,” the manager said. “Everyone has to pay some, you know. Price of doing business.”

Miller closed his terminal, frowning. “Philosophical. But if it’s the price of doing business, what’re we here for?”

“Because I thought you… you people had this shit under control. Ever since we stopped paying the Loca, I’ve been able to turn a decent profit. Now it’s all starting up again.”

“Hold on,” Miller said. “You’re telling me the Loca Greiga stopped charging protection?”

“Sure. Not just here. Half of the guys I know in the Bough just stopped showing up. We figured the cops had actually done something for once. Now we’ve got these new bastards, and it’s the same damn thing all over again.”

A crawling feeling made its way up Miller’s neck. He looked up at Havelock, who shook his head. He hadn’t heard of it either. The Golden Bough Society, Sohiro’s crew, the Loca Greiga. All the organized crime on Ceres suffering the same ecological collapse, and now someone new moving into the evacuated niche. Might be opportunism. Might be something else. He almost didn’t want to ask the next questions. Havelock was going to think he was paranoid.

“How long has it been since the old guys called on you for protection?” Miller asked.

“I don’t know. Long time.”

“Before or after Mars killed that water hauler?”

The manager folded his thick arms; his eyes narrowed.

"Before," he said. "Maybe a month or two. S'that got to do with anything?"

"Just trying to get the time scale right," Miller said. "The new guy. Mateo. He tell you who was backing his new insurance plan?"

"That's your job, figuring it. Right?"

The manager's expression had closed down so hard Miller imagined he could hear the click. Yes, Asher Kamamatsu knew who was shaking him down. He had balls enough to squeak about it but not to point the finger.

Interesting.

"Well, thanks for that," Miller said, standing up. "We'll let you know what we find."

"Glad you're on the case," the manager said, matching sarcasm for sarcasm.

In the exterior tunnel, Miller stopped. The neighborhood was at the friction point between sleazy and respectable. White marks showed where graffiti had been painted over. Men on bicycles swerved and weaved, foam wheels humming on the polished stone. Miller walked slowly, his eyes on the ceiling high above them until he found the security camera. He pulled up his terminal, navigated to the logs that matched the camera code, and cross-referenced the time code from the store's still frames. For a moment, he thumbed the controls, speeding people back and forth. And there was Mateo, coming out of the shop. A smug grin deformed the man's face. Miller froze the image and enhanced it. Havelock, watching over his shoulder, whistled low.

The split circle of the OPA was perfectly clear on the thug's armband—the same kind of armband he'd found in Julie Mao's hole.

What kind of company have you been keeping, kid? Miller thought. *You're better than this. You have to know you're better than this.*

"Hey, partner," he said aloud. "Think you can write up the report on that interview? I've got something I'd like to do. Might not be too smart to have you there. No offense."

Havelock's eyebrows crawled toward his hairline.

"You're going to question the OPA?"

"Shake some trees, is all," Miller said.

Miller would have thought that just being a security contractor in a known OPA-convivial bar would be enough to get him noticed. In the event, half the faces he recognized in the dim light of John Rock

Gentlemen's Club were normal citizens. More than one of those were Star Helix, just like him, when they were on duty. The music was pure Belter, soft chimes accompanied by zither and guitar with lyrics in half a dozen languages. He was on his fourth beer, two hours past the end of his shift, and on the edge of giving up his plan as a losing scheme when a tall, thin man sat down at the bar next to him. Acne-pocked cheeks gave a sense of damage to a face that otherwise seemed on the verge of laughter. It wasn't the first OPA armband he'd seen that night, but it was worn with an air of defiance and authority. Miller nodded.

"I heard you've been asking about the OPA," the man said. "Interested in joining up?"

Miller smiled and lifted his glass, an intentionally noncommittal gesture.

"You who I'd talk to if I did?" he asked, his tone light.

"Might be able to help."

"Maybe you could tell me about a couple other things, then," he said, taking out his terminal and putting it on the fake bamboo bar with an audible click. Mateo Judd's picture glowed on the screen. The OPA man frowned, turning the screen to see it better.

"I'm a realist," Miller said. "When Chucky Snails was running protection, I wasn't above talking to his men. When the Hand took over and then the Golden Bough Society after them. My job isn't to stop people from bending the rules, it's to keep Ceres stable. You understand what I'm saying?"

"I can't say I do," the pock-marked man said. His accent made him sound more educated than Miller had expected. "Who is this man?"

"His name's Mateo Judd. He's been starting a protection business in sector eight. Says it's backed by the OPA."

"People say things, Detective. It is Detective, isn't it? But you were discussing realism."

"If the OPA's making a move on the Ceres black economy, it's going to be better all around if we can talk to each other. Communicate."

The man chuckled and pushed the terminal back. The bartender paced by, a question in his eyes that wasn't asking if they needed anything. It wasn't meant for Miller.

"I had heard that there was a certain level of corruption in Star Helix," the man said. "I admit I'm impressed by your straightforward manner. I'll clarify. The OPA isn't a criminal organization."

"Really? My mistake. I figured from the way it killed a lot of people… "

"You're baiting me. We defend ourselves against people who are perpetrating economic terrorism against the Belt. Earthers. Martians. We are in the business of protecting Belters," the man said. "Even you,

Detective."

"Economic terrorism?" Miller said. "That seems a little overheated."

"You think so? The inner planets look on us as their labor force. They tax us. They direct what we do. They enforce their laws and ignore ours in the name of stability. In the last year, they've doubled the tariffs to Titania. Five thousand people on an ice ball orbiting Neptune, months from anywhere. The sun's just a bright star to them. Do you think they're in a position to get redress? They've blocked any Belter freighters from taking Europa contracts. They charge us twice as much to dock at Ganymede. The science station on Phoebe? We aren't even allowed to *orbit* it. There isn't a Belter in the place. Whatever they do there, we won't find out until they sell the technology back to us, ten years from now."

Miller sipped his beer and nodded toward his terminal.

"So this one isn't yours?"

"No. He isn't."

Miller nodded and put the terminal back in his pocket. Oddly, he believed the man. He didn't hold himself like a thug. The bravado wasn't there. The sense of trying to impress the world. No, this man was certain and amused and, underneath it all, profoundly tired. Miller had known soldiers like that, but not criminals.

"One other thing," Miller said. "I'm looking for someone."

"Another investigation?"

"Not exactly, no. Juliette Andromeda Mao. Goes by Julie."

"Should I know the name?"

"She's OPA," Miller said with a shrug.

"Do you know everyone in Star Helix?" the man said, and when Miller didn't answer, he added, "We are considerably larger than your corporation."

"Fair point," Miller said. "But if you could keep an ear out, I'd appreciate it."

"I don't know that you're in a position to expect favors."

"No harm asking."

The pock-faced man chuckled, put a hand on Miller's shoulder.

"Don't come back here, Detective," he said, and walked away into the crowd.

Miller took another drink of his beer, frowning. An uncomfortable feeling of having made the wrong step fidgeted in the back of his mind. He'd been sure that the OPA was making a move on Ceres, capitalizing on the death of the water hauler and the Belt's uptick in fear and hatred of the inner planets. But how did that fit with Julie Mao's father and his suspiciously well-timed anxiety? Or the disappearance of Ceres Station's supply of usual suspects in the first place? Thinking about it was like watching a video that was just out of

focus. The sense of it was almost there, but only almost.

"Too many dots," Miller said. "Not enough lines."

"Excuse me?" the bartender said.

"Nothing," Miller said, pushing the half-empty bottle across the bar. "Thanks."

In his hole, Miller turned on some music. The lyrical chants that Candace had liked, back when they were young and, if not hopeful, at least more joyful in their fatalism. He set the lights to half power, hoping that if he relaxed, if for just a few minutes he let go of the gnawing sense that he had missed some critical detail, the missing piece might arrive on its own.

He'd half expected Candace to appear in his mind, sighing and looking crossly at him the way she had in life. Instead, he found himself talking with Julie Mao. In the half sleep of alcohol and exhaustion, he imagined her sitting at Havelock's desk. She was the wrong age, younger than the real woman would be. She was the age of the smiling kid in her picture. The girl who had raced in the *Razorback* and won. He had the sense of asking her questions, and her answers had the power of revelation. Everything made sense. Not only the change in the Golden Bough Society and her own abduction case, but Havelock's transfer, the dead ice hauler, Miller's own life and work. He dreamed of Julie Mao laughing, and he woke up late, with a headache.

Havelock was waiting at his desk. His broad, short Earther face seemed strangely alien, but Miller tried to shake it off.

"You look like crap," Havelock said. "Busy night?"

"Just getting old and drinking cheap beer," Miller said.

One of the vice squad shouted something angry about her files being locked again, and a computer tech scuttled across the station house like a nervous cockroach. Havelock leaned closer, his expression grave.

"Seriously, Miller," Havelock said. "We're still partners, and… honest to God, I think you may be the only friend I've got on this rock. You can trust me. If there's anything you want to tell me, I'm good."

"That's great," Miller said. "But I don't know what you're talking about. Last night was a bust."

"No OPA?"

"Sure, OPA. Anymore, you swing a dead cat in this station, you'll hit three OPA guys. Just no good information."

Havelock leaned back, lips pressed thin and bloodless. Miller's shrug asked a question, and the Earther nodded toward the board. A new homicide topped the list. At three in the morning, while Miller had been having inchoate dream conversations, someone had opened Mateo Judd's hole and fired a shotgun cartridge full of ballistic gel

into his left eye.

"Well," Miller said, "called that one wrong."

"Which one?" Havelock said.

"OPA's not moving in on the criminals," Miller said. "They're moving in on the cops."

Chapter Eleven: Holden

The *Donnager* was ugly.

Holden had seen pictures and videos of the old oceangoing navies of Earth, and even in the age of steel, there had always been something beautiful about them. Long and sleek, they had the appearance of something leaning into the wind, a creature barely held on the leash. The *Donnager* had none of that. Like all long-flight spacecraft, it was built in the "office tower" configuration: each deck one floor of the building, ladders or elevators running down the axis. Constant thrust took the place of gravity.

But the *Donnager* actually *looked* like an office building on its side. Square and blocky, with small bulbous projections in seemingly random places. At nearly five hundred meters long, it was the size of a 130-story building. Alex had said it was 250,000 tons dry weight, and it looked heavier. Holden reflected, not for the first time, on how so much of the human sense of aesthetics had been formed in a time when sleek objects cut through the air. The *Donnager* would never move through anything thicker than interstellar gas, so curves and angles were a waste of space. The result was ugly.

It was also intimidating. As Holden watched from his seat next to Alex in the cockpit of the *Knight,* the massive battleship matched course with them, looming close and then seeming to stop above them. A docking bay opened, breaking up the *Donnager*'s flat black belly with a square of dim red light. The *Knight* beeped insistently, reminding him of the targeting lasers painting their hull. Holden looked for the point defense cannons aimed at him. He couldn't find them.

When Alex spoke, Holden jumped.

"Roger that, *Donnager,*" the pilot said. "We've got steering lock. I'm killing thrust."

The last shreds of weight vanished. Both ships were still moving at hundreds of kilometers a minute, but their matched courses felt like stillness.

"Got docking permission, Cap. Take her in?"

"It seems late to make a run for it, Mr. Kamal," Holden said. He imagined Alex making a mistake that the *Donnager* interpreted as threatening, and the point defense cannons throwing a couple hundred thousand Teflon-coated chunks of steel through them.

"Go slowly, Alex," he said.

"They say one of those can kill a planet," Naomi said over the comm. She was at the ops station a deck below.

“Anyone can kill a planet from orbit,” Holden replied. “You don’t even need bombs. Just push anvils out the airlock. That thing out there could kill… Shit. Anything.”

Tiny touches shifted them as the maneuvering rockets fired. Holden knew that Alex was guiding them in, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that the *Donnager* was swallowing them.

Docking took nearly an hour. Once the *Knight* was inside the bay, a massive manipulator arm grabbed *her* and put it down in an empty section of the deck. Clamps grabbed the ship, the *Knight*’s hull reverberating with a metallic bang that reminded Holden of a brig cell’s maglocks.

The Martians ran a docking tube from one wall and mated up to the *Knight*’s airlock. Holden gathered the crew at the inner door.

“No guns, no knives, no anything that might look like a weapon,” he said. “They’ll probably be okay with hand terminals, but keep them turned off just in case. If they ask for it, hand it over without complaint. Our survival here may rest on them thinking we’re very compliant.”

“Yeah,” Amos said. “Fuckers killed McDowell, but *we* have to act nice… ”

Alex started to respond, but Holden cut him off.

“Alex, you did twenty flying with the MCRN. Anything else we should know?”

“Same stuff you said, Boss,” Alex replied. “Yes sir, no sir, and snap to when given an order. The enlisted guys will be okay, but the officers get the sense of humor trained out of ’em.”

Holden looked at his tiny crew, hoping he hadn’t killed them all by bringing them here. He cycled open the lock, and they drifted down the short docking tube in the zero g. When they reached the airlock at the end—flat gray composites and immaculately clean—everyone pushed down to the floor. Their magnetic boots grabbed on. The airlock closed and hissed at them for several seconds before opening into a larger room with about a dozen people standing in it. Holden recognized Captain Theresa Yao. There were several others in naval officers’ dress, who were part of her staff; one man in an enlisted uniform with a look of thinly veiled impatience; and six marines in heavy combat armor, carrying assault rifles. The rifles were pointed at him, so Holden put up his hands.

"We're not armed," he said, smiling and trying to look harmless.

The rifles didn't waver, but Captain Yao stepped forward.

"Welcome aboard the *Donnager,*" she said. "Chief, check them."

The enlisted man clumped toward them and quickly and professionally patted them all down. He gave the thumbs-up to one of the marines. The rifles went down, and Holden worked hard not to sigh with relief.

"What now, Captain?" Holden asked, keeping his voice light.

Yao looked Holden over critically for several seconds before answering. Her hair was pulled tightly back, the few strands of gray making straight lines. In person, he could see the softening of age at her jaw and the corners of her eyes. Her stony expression had the same quiet arrogance that all the naval captains he'd known shared. He wondered what she saw, looking at him. He resisted the urge to straighten his greasy hair.

"Chief Gunderson will take you down to your rooms and get you settled in," she replied. "Someone will be along shortly to debrief you."

Chief Gunderson started to lead them from the room when Yao spoke again, her voice suddenly hard.

"Mr. Holden, if you know anything about the six ships that are following you, speak now," she said. "We gave them a two-hour deadline to change course about an hour ago. So far they haven't. In one hour I'm going to order a torpedo launch. If they're friends of yours, you could save them a great deal of pain."

Holden shook his head emphatically.

"All I know is they came out of the Belt when you started out to meet us, Captain," Holden said. "They haven't talked to us. Our best guess is they're concerned citizens of the Belt coming to watch what happens."

Yao nodded. If she found the thought of witnesses disconcerting, it didn't show.

"Take them below, Chief," she said, then turned away.

Chief Gunderson gave a soft whistle and pointed at one of the two doors. Holden's crew followed him out, the marines bringing up the rear. As they moved through the *Donnager,* Holden took his first really up-close look at a Martian capital ship. He'd never served on a battleship in the UN Navy, and he'd stepped foot on them maybe three times in seven years, always in dock, and usually for a party. Every inch of the *Donnager* was just a little sharper than any UN vessel he'd served on. *Mars really does build them better than we do.*

"Goddamn, XO, they sure do keep their shit squeaky clean," Amos said behind him.

"Ain't much to do on a long flight for most of the crew, Amos," Alex

said. “So when you aren’t doin’ somethin’ else, you clean.”

“See, that’s why I work haulers,” Amos said. “Clean decks or get drunk and screw, and I’ve got a preference.”

As they walked through a maze of corridors, the ship started a slight vibration, and gravity slowly reappeared. They were under thrust. Holden used his heels to touch his boots’ slide controls, turning the magnets off.

They saw almost no one, and the few they did see moved fast and said little, barely sparing them a glance. With six ships closing on them, everyone would be at their duty stations. When Captain Yao had said she’d fire her torpedoes in an hour, there hadn’t been a hint of threat in her voice. It was just a flat statement of fact. For most of the young sailors on this ship, it would probably be the first time they’d ever been in a live combat situation—if it came to that. Holden didn’t believe it would.

He wondered what to make of the fact that Yao was prepared to take out a handful of Belt ships just because they were running quiet and close. It didn’t suggest that they’d hesitate to kill a water hauler, like the *Cant,* if they thought there was reason to.

Gunderson brought them to a stop in front of a hatch with *OQ117* printed on it. He slid a card through the lock and gestured everyone inside.

“Better than I’d expected,” Shed said, sounding impressed.

The compartment was large by ship standards. It had six high-g couches and a small table with four chairs stuck to the deck with magnetic feet. An open door in one bulkhead showed a smaller compartment with a toilet and sink. Gunderson and the marine lieutenant followed the crew inside.

“This is your rack for the time being,” the chief said. “There’s a comm panel on the wall. Two of Lieutenant Kelly’s people will be stationed outside. Buzz them and they’ll send for anything you need.”

“How about some chow?” Amos said.

“We’ll have some sent up. You are to remain here until called for,” Gunderson said. “Lieutenant Kelly, you have anything to add, sir?”

The marine lieutenant looked them over.

“The men outside are there for your protection, but they will react unpleasantly if you make any trouble,” he said. “You read me?”

“Loud and clear, Lieutenant,” Holden said. “Don’t worry. My people will be the easiest houseguests you’ve ever had.”

Kelly nodded at Holden with what seemed like genuine gratitude. He was a professional doing an unpleasant job. Holden sympathized. Also, he’d known enough marines to know how unpleasant it could get if they felt challenged.

Gunderson said, “Can you take Mr. Holden here to his appointment

on your way out, El Tee? I'd like to get these folks squared away."

Kelly nodded and took Holden's elbow.

"Come with me, sir," he said.

"Where am I going, Lieutenant?"

"Lieutenant Lopez asked to see you as soon as you landed. I'm taking you to him."

Shed looked nervously from the marine to Holden and back. Naomi nodded. They'd all see each other again, Holden told himself. He even thought it was likely to be true.

Kelly led Holden at a brisk pace through the ship. His rifle was no longer at the ready but hanging from his shoulder loosely. Either he'd decided Holden wasn't going to cause trouble, or that he could take him down easily if he did.

"Can I ask who Lieutenant Lopez is?"

"He's the guy who asked to see you," Kelly said.

Kelly stopped at a plain gray door, rapped once, then took Holden inside a small compartment with a table and two uncomfortable-looking chairs. A dark-haired man was setting up a recorder. He waved one hand vaguely in the direction of a chair. Holden sat. The chair was even less comfortable than it looked.

"You can go, Mr. Kelly," the man Holden assumed was Lopez said. Kelly left and closed the door.

When Lopez had finished, he sat down across the table from Holden and reached out one hand. Holden shook it.

"I'm Lieutenant Lopez. Kelly probably told you that. I work for naval intelligence, which he almost certainly didn't tell you. My job isn't secret, but they train jarheads to be tight-lipped."

Lopez reached into his pocket, took out a small packet of white lozenges, and popped one into his mouth. He didn't offer one to Holden. Lopez's pupils contracted to tiny points as he sucked the lozenge. Focus drugs. He'd be watching every tic of Holden's face during questioning. Tough to lie to.

"First Lieutenant James R. Holden, of Montana," he said. It wasn't a question.

"Yes, sir," Holden said anyway.

"Seven years in the UNN, last posting on the destroyer *Zhang Fei.*"

"That's me."

"Your file says you were busted out for assaulting a superior officer," Lopez said. "That's pretty cliché, Holden. You punched the old man? Seriously?"

"No. I missed. Broke my hand on a bulkhead."

"How'd that happen?"

"He was quicker than I expected," Holden replied.

"Why'd you try?"

“I was projecting my self-loathing onto him. It’s just a stroke of luck that I actually wound up hurting the right person,” Holden said.

“Sounds like you’ve thought about it some since then,” Lopez said, his pinprick pupils never moving from Holden’s face. “ Therapy?”

“Lots of time to think on the *Canterbury,*” Holden replied.

Lopez ignored the obvious opening and said, “What did you come up with, during all that thinking?”

“The Coalition has been stepping on the necks of the people out here for over a hundred years now. I didn’t like being the boot.”

“An OPA sympathizer, then?” Lopez said, his expression not changing at all.

“No. I didn’t switch sides. I stopped playing. I didn’t renounce my citizenship. I like Montana. I’m out here because I like flying, and only a Belter rust trap like the *Canterbury* will hire me.”

Lopez smiled for the first time. “You’re an exceedingly honest man, Mr. Holden.”

“Yes.”

“Why did you claim that a Martian military vessel destroyed your ship?”

“I didn’t. I explained all that in the broadcast. It had technology only available to inner planet fleets, and I found a piece of MCRN hardware in the device that tricked us into stopping.”

“We’ll want to see that.”

“You’re welcome to it.”

“Your file says you were the only child of a family co-op,” Lopez said, acting as though they’d never stopped talking about Holden’s past.

“Yes, five fathers, three mothers.”

“So many parents for only one child,” Lopez said, slowly unwrapping another lozenge. The Martians had lots of space for traditional families.

“The tax break for eight adults only having one child allowed them to own twenty-two acres of decent farmland. There are over thirty billion people on Earth. Twenty-two acres is a national park,” Holden said. “Also, the DNA mix is legit. They aren’t parents in name only.”

“How did they decide who carried you?”

“Mother Elise had the widest hips.”

Lopez popped the second lozenge into his mouth and sucked on it a few moments. Before he could speak again, the deck shook. The video recorder jiggled on its arm.

“Torpedo launches?” Holden said. “Guess those Belt ships didn’t change course.”

“Any thoughts about that, Mr. Holden?”

“Just that you seem pretty willing to kill Belt ships.”

“You’ve put us in a position where we can’t afford to seem weak. After your accusations, there are a lot of people who don’t think much of us.”

Holden shrugged. If the man was watching for guilt or remorse from Holden, he was out of luck. The Belt ships had known what they were going toward. They hadn’t turned away. But still, something bothered him.

“They might hate your living guts,” Holden said. “But it’s hard to find enough suicidal people to crew six ships. Maybe they think they can outrun torpedoes.”

Lopez didn’t move, his whole body preternaturally still with the focus drugs pouring through him.

“We—” Lopez began, and the general quarters Klaxon sounded. It was deafening in the small metal compartment.

“Holy shit, did they shoot *back*?” Holden asked.

Lopez shook himself, like a man waking up from a daydream. He got up and hit the comm button by the door. A marine came through seconds later.

“Take Mr. Holden back to his quarters,” Lopez said, then left the room at a run.

The marine gestured at the corridor with the barrel of his rifle. His expression was hard.

It’s all fun and games till someone shoots back, Holden thought.

Naomi patted the empty couch next to her and smiled.

“Did they put slivers under your fingernails?” she asked.

“No, actually, he was surprisingly human for a naval intelligence wonk,” Holden replied. “Of course, he was just getting warmed up. Have you guys heard anything about the other ships?”

Alex said, “Nope. But that alarm means they’re takin’ them seriously all of a sudden.”

“It’s insane,” Shed said quietly. “Flying around in these metal bubbles, and then trying to poke holes in each other. You ever seen what long-term decompression and cold exposure does? Breaks all the capillaries in your eyes and skin. Tissue damage to the lungs can cause massive pneumonia followed by emphysema-like scarring. I mean, if you don’t just die.”

“Well, that’s awful fucking cheerful, Doc. Thanks for that,” Amos said.

The ship suddenly vibrated in a syncopated but ultra-high-speed rhythm. Alex looked at Holden, his eyes wide.

"That's the point defense network openin' up. That means incoming torpedoes," he said. "Better strap in tight, kids. The ship might start doin' some violent maneuvering."

Everyone but Holden was already belted into the couches. He fastened his restraints too.

"This sucks. All the real action is happenin' thousands of klicks from here, and we got no instruments to look at," Alex said. "We won't know if somethin' slipped through the flack screen till it rips the hull open."

"Boy, everybody is just a fucking pile of fun right now," Amos said loudly.

Shed's eyes were wide, his face too pale. Holden shook his head.

"Not going to happen," he said. "This thing is unkillable. Whoever those ships are, they can put on a good show, but that's it."

"All respect, Captain," Naomi said. "But whoever those ships are, they should be dead already, and they aren't."

The distant noises of faraway combat kept up. The occasional rumble of a torpedo firing. The near-constant vibration of the high-speed point defense guns. Holden didn't realize he'd fallen asleep until he was jerked awake by an earsplitting roar. Amos and Alex were yelling. Shed was screaming.

"What happened?" Holden yelled over the noise.

"We're hit, Cap!" Alex said. "That was a torpedo hit!"

The gravity suddenly dropped away. The *Donnager* had stopped its engines. Or they'd been destroyed.

Amos was still yelling, "Shit shit shit," over everything. But at least Shed had stopped screaming. He was staring wide eyed out of his couch, his face white. Holden unbuckled his straps and pushed off toward the comm panel.

"Jim!" Naomi called out. "What are you doing?"

"We need to find out what's going on," Holden said over his shoulder.

When he reached the bulkhead by the hatch, he punched the comm panel call button. There was no reply. He hit it again, then started pounding on the hatch. No one came.

"Where are our damn marines?" he said.

The lights dimmed, came back up. Then again, and again, in a slow cadence.

"Gauss turrets firing. Shit. It's CQB," Alex said in awe.

In the history of the Coalition, no capital ship had ever gotten into a close-quarters battle. But here they were, firing the ship's big cannons, which meant that the range was sufficiently short that a nonguided

weapon was viable. Hundreds or even dozens of kilometers, not thousands. Somehow the Belt ships had survived *Donnager*'s torpedo barrage.

"Anyone else think this is desperate fucking queer?" Amos asked, a touch of panic in his voice.

The *Donnager* began to ring like a gong struck over and over again by a massive hammer. Return fire.

The gauss round that killed Shed didn't even make a noise. Like a magic trick, two perfectly round holes appeared on either side of the room in a line that intersected Shed's couch. One moment, the medic was there; the next, his head was gone from the Adam's apple up. Arterial blood pumped out in a red cloud, pulled into two thin lines, and whirled to the holes in the walls of the room as the air rushed out.

Chapter Twelve: Miller

For twelve years, Miller had worked security. Violence and death were familiar companions to him. Men, women. Animals. Kids. Once he'd held a woman's hand while she bled to death. He'd killed two people, could still see them die if he closed his eyes and thought about it. If anyone had asked him, he'd have said there wasn't much left that would shake him.

But he'd never watched a war start before.

The Distinguished Hyacinth Lounge was in the shift-change rush. Men and women in security uniforms—mostly from Star Helix, but a few smaller companies too—were either drinking their after-work liquor and winding down or making trips to the breakfast buffet for coffee, textured fungi in sugar sauce, sausage with meat maybe one part in a thousand. Miller chewed the sausage and watched the display monitor on the wall. A Star Helix external relations head looked sincerely out, his demeanor radiating calm and certainty as he explained how everything was going to hell.

"Preliminary scans suggest that the explosion was the result of a failed attempt to connect a nuclear device to the docking station. Officials from the Martian government have referred to the incident only as an 'alleged terrorist action' and refused comment pending further investigation."

"Another one," Havelock said from behind him. "You know, eventually, one of those assholes is going to get it right."

Miller turned in his seat, then nodded to the chair beside him. Havelock sat.

"That'll be an interesting day," Miller said. "I was about to call you."

"Yeah, sorry," his partner said. "I was up kind of late."

"Any word on the transfer?"

"No," Havelock said. "Figure my paperwork's hung on a desk someplace in Olympus. What about you? Any word on your special-project girl?"

"Not yet," Miller said. "Look, the reason I wanted to meet up before we went in… I need to take a couple days, try to run down some leads on Julie. With all this other shit going on, Shaddid doesn't want me doing much more than phoning this one in."

"But you're ignoring that," Havelock said. It wasn't a question.

"I've got a feeling about this one."

"So how can I help?"

"I need you to cover for me."

“How am I going to do that?” Havelock asked. “It’s not like I can tell them you’re sick. They’ve got access to your medical records same as everyone else’s.”

“Tell ’em I’ve been getting drunk a lot,” Miller said. “That Candace came by. She’s my ex-wife.”

Havelock chewed his sausage, brow furrowed. The Earther shook his head slowly—not a refusal, but the prelude to a question. Miller waited.

“You’re telling me you’d rather have the boss think you’re missing work because you’re on a dysfunctional, heartbroken bender than that you’re doing the work she assigned you? I don’t get it.”

Miller licked his lips and leaned forward, elbows on the smooth off-white table. Someone had scratched a design into the plastic. A split circle. And this was a cop bar.

“I don’t know what I’m looking at,” Miller said. “There’s a bunch of things that belong together somehow, and I’m not sure yet what it is. Until I know more, I need to stay low. A guy has a fling with his ex, hits the bottle for a few days? That’s not going to light up anyone’s panels.”

Havelock shook his head again, this time in mild disbelief. If he’d been a Belter, he’d have made the gesture with his hands, so you could see it when he had an environment suit on. Another of the hundred small ways someone who hadn’t grown up on the Belt betrayed himself. The wall monitor cut to the image of a blond woman in a severe uniform. The external relations head was talking about the Martian navy’s tactical response and whether the OPA was behind the increased vandalism. That was what he called fumbling an overloaded fusion reactor while setting up a ship-killing booby trap: vandalism.

“That shit just doesn’t follow,” Havelock said, and for a moment Miller didn’t know if he meant the Belter guerrilla actions, the Martian response, or the favor he’d asked. “Seriously. Where’s Earth? All this shit’s going on, and we don’t hear a damn thing from them.”

“Why would we?” Miller asked. “It’s Mars and the Belt going at it.”

“When was the last time Earth let anything major happen without them in the middle of it?” Havelock said, then sighed. “Okay. You’re too drunk to come in. Your love life’s a mess. I’m trying to cover for you.”

“Just for a couple days.”

“Make sure you get back before someone decides it’s the perfect chance for a random shooting to take out the Earther cop.”

“I’ll do that,” Miller said, rising from the table. “You watch your back.”

“Don’t need to tell me twice,” Havelock said.

The Ceres Center for Jiu Jitsu was down near the port, where the spin gravity was strongest. The hole was a converted storage space from before the big spin. A cylinder flattened where flooring had been set in about a third of the way from the bottom. Racks bearing various lengths of staffs, bamboo swords, and dull plastic practice knives hung from the vaulted ceiling. The polished stone echoed with the grunting of men working a line of resistance machines and the soft thud of a woman at the back punishing a heavy bag. Three students stood on the central mat, speaking in low voices.

Pictures filled the front wall on either side of the door. Soldiers in uniform. Security agents for half a dozen Belter corporations. Not many inner planet types, but a few. Plaques commemorating placements in competitions. A page of small type outlining the history of the studio.

One of the students shouted and collapsed, carrying one of the others to the mat with her. The one still standing applauded and helped them back up. Miller searched through the wall of pictures, hoping to find Julie.

"Can I help you?"

The man was half a head shorter than Miller and easily twice as broad. It should have made him look like an Earther, but everything else about him said Belt. He wore pale sweats that made his skin seem even darker. His smile was curious and as serene as a well-fed predator. Miller nodded.

"Detective Miller," he said. "I'm with station security. There's one of your students I wanted to get some background on."

"This is an official investigation?" the man asked.

"Yeah," Miller said. "I'm afraid it is."

"Then you'll have a warrant."

Miller smiled. The man smiled back.

"We don't give out any information on our students without a warrant," he said. "Studio policy."

"I respect that," Miller said. "No, I really do. It's just that… parts of this particular investigation are maybe a little more official than others. The girl's not in trouble. She didn't do anything. But she has family on Luna who want her found."

"A kidnap job," the man said, folding his arms. The serene face had gone cool without any apparent movement.

"Only the official part," Miller said. "I can get a warrant, and we

can do the whole thing through channels. But then I have to tell my boss. The more she knows, the less room I have to move."

The man didn't react. His stillness was unnerving. Miller struggled not to fidget. The woman working the heavy bag at the far end of the studio went through a flurry of strikes, shouting out with each one.

"Who?" the man asked.

"Julie Mao," Miller said. He could have said he was looking for the Buddha's mother for all the reaction he got. "I think she's in trouble."

"Why do you care if she is?"

"I don't know the answer to that one," Miller said. "I just do. If you don't want to help me, then you don't."

"And you'll go get your warrant. Do this through channels."

Miller took off his hat, rubbed a long, thin hand across his head, and put the hat back in place.

"Probably not," he said.

"Let me see your ID," the man said. Miller pulled up his terminal and let the man confirm who he was. The man handed it back and pointed to a small door behind the heavy bags. Miller did as he was told.

The office was cramped. A small laminate desk with a soft sphere behind it in lieu of a chair. Two stools that looked like they'd come out of a bar. A filing cabinet with a small fabricator that stank of ozone and oil that was probably where the plaques and certificates were made.

"Why does the family want her?" the man asked, lowering himself onto the sphere. It acted like a chair but required constant balance. A place to rest without actually resting.

"They think she's in harm's way. At least, that's what they're saying, and I don't have reason to disbelieve them yet."

"What kind of harm?"

"Don't know," Miller said. "I know she was on station. I know she shipped out for Tycho, and after that, I've got nothing."

"Her family want her back on their station?"

The man knew who her family was. Miller filed the information away without missing a beat.

"I don't think so," Miller said. "The last message she got from them routed through Luna."

"Down the well." The way he said it made it sound like a disease.

"I'm looking for anyone who knows who she was shipping with. If she's on a run, where she was going and when she was planning to get there. If she's in range of a tightbeam."

"I don't know any of that," the man said.

"You know anyone I should ask?"

There was a pause.

“Maybe. I’ll find what I can for you.”

“Anything else you can tell me about her?”

“She started at the studio five years ago. She was… angry when she first came. Undisciplined.”

“She got better,” Miller said. “Brown belt, right?”

The man’s eyebrows rose.

“I’m a cop,” Miller said. “I find things out.”

“She improved,” her teacher said. “She’d been attacked. Just after she came to the Belt. She was seeing that it didn’t happen twice.”

“Attacked,” Miller said, parsing the man’s tone of voice. “Raped?”

“I didn’t ask. She trained hard, even when she was off station. You can tell when people let it slide. They come back weaker. She never did.”

“Tough girl,” Miller said. “Good for her. Did she have friends? People she sparred with?”

“A few. No lovers that I know of, since that’s the next question.”

“That’s strange. Girl like that.”

“Like what, Detective?”

“Pretty girl,” Miller said. “Competent. Smart. Dedicated. Who wouldn’t want to be with someone like that?”

“Perhaps she hadn’t met the right person.”

Something in the way he said it hinted at amusement. Miller shrugged, uncomfortable in his skin.

“What kind of work did she do?” he asked.

“Light freighter. I don’t know of any particular cargo. I had the impression that she shipped wherever there was a need.”

“Not a regular route, then?”

“That was my impression.”

“Whose ships did she work? One particular freighter, or whatever came to hand? A particular company?”

“I’ll find what I can for you,” the man said.

“Courier for the OPA?”

“I’ll find out,” the man said, “what I can.”

The news that afternoon was all about Phoebe. The science station there—the one that Belters weren’t allowed even to dock at—had been hit. The official report stated that half the inhabitants of the base were dead, the other half missing. No one had claimed responsibility yet, but the common wisdom was that some Belter group—maybe the

OPA, maybe someone else—had finally managed an act of "vandalism" with a body count. Miller sat in his hole, watching the broadcast feed and drinking.

It was all going to hell. The pirate casts from the OPA calling for war. The burgeoning guerrilla actions. All of it. The time was coming that Mars wasn't going to ignore them anymore. And when Mars took action, it wouldn't matter if Earth followed suit. It would be the first real war in the Belt. The catastrophe was coming, and neither side seemed to understand how vulnerable they were. And there was nothing—not one single goddamned thing—that he could do to stop it. He couldn't even slow it down.

Julie Mao grinned at him from the still frame, her pinnace behind her. Attacked, the man had said. There was nothing about it in her record. Might have been a mugging. Might have been something worse. Miller had known a lot of victims, and he put them into three categories. First there were the ones who pretended nothing had happened, or that whatever it was didn't really matter. That was well over half the people he talked to. Then there were the professionals, people who took their victimization as permission to act out any way they saw fit. That ate most of the rest.

Maybe 5 percent, maybe less, were the ones who sucked it up, learned the lesson, and moved on. The Julies. The good ones.

His door chimed three hours after his official shift was over. Miller stood up, less steady on his feet than he'd expected. He counted the bottles on the table. There were more than he'd thought. He hesitated for a moment, torn between answering the door and throwing the bottles into the recycler. The door chimed again. He went to open it. If it was someone from the station, they expected him to be drunk, anyway. No reason to disappoint.

The face was familiar. Acne-pocked, controlled. The OPA armband from the bar. The one who'd had Mateo Judd killed.

The cop.

"Evening," Miller said.

"Detective Miller," the pocked man said. "I think we've gotten off on the wrong foot. I was hoping we could try again."

"Right."

"May I come in?"

"I try not to take strange men home," Miller said. "I don't even know your name."

"Anderson Dawes," the pocked man said. "I'm the Ceres liaison for the Outer Planets Alliance. I think we can help each other. May I come in?"

Miller stood back, and the pocked man—Dawes—stepped inside. Dawes took in the hole for the space of two slow breaths, then sat as if

the bottles and the stink of old beer were nothing to comment on. Silently cursing himself and willing a sobriety he didn't feel, Miller sat across from him.

"I need a favor from you," Dawes said. "I'm willing to pay for it. Not money, of course. Information."

"What do you want?" Miller asked.

"Stop looking for Juliette Mao."

"No sale."

"I'm trying to keep the peace, Detective," Dawes said. "You should hear me out."

Miller leaned forward, elbows on the table. Mr. Serene Jiu Jitsu Instructor was working for the OPA? The timing of Dawes' visit seemed to be saying so. Miller filed that possibility away but said nothing.

"Mao worked for us," Dawes said. "But you'd guessed that."

"More or less. You know where she is?"

"We don't. We are looking for her. And we need to be the ones to find her. Not you."

Miller shook his head. There was a response, the right thing to say. It was rattling in the back of his head, and if he just didn't feel quite so fuzzy…

"You're one of *them,* Detective. You may have lived your whole life out here, but your salary is paid by an inner planet corporation. No, wait. I don't blame you. I understand how it is. They were hiring and you needed the work. But… we're walking on a bubble right now. The *Canterbury.* The fringe elements in the Belt calling for war."

"Phoebe Station."

"Yes, they'll blame us for that too. Add a Luna corporation's prodigal daughter… "

"You think something's happened to her."

"She was on the *Scopuli,*" Dawes said, and when Miller didn't immediately respond, he added, "The freighter that Mars used as bait when they killed the *Canterbury.*"

Miller thought about that for a long moment, then whistled low.

"We don't know what happened," Dawes said. "Until we do, I can't have you stirring up the water. It's muddy enough now."

"And what information are you offering?" Miller asked. "That's the trade, right?"

"I'll tell you what we find. After we find her," Dawes said. Miller chuckled, and the OPA man went on. "It's a generous offer, considering who you are. Employee of Mars. Partner of an Earther. Some people would think that was enough to make you the enemy too."

"But not you," Miller said.

“I think we’ve got the same basic goals, you and I. Stability. Safety. Strange times make for strange alliances.”

“Two questions.”

Dawes spread his arms, welcoming them.

“Who took the riot gear?” Miller asked.

“Riot gear?”

“Before the *Canterbury* died, someone took our riot gear. Maybe they wanted to arm soldiers for crowd control. Maybe they didn’t want our crowds controlled. Who took it? Why?”

“It wasn’t us,” Dawes said.

“That’s not an answer. Try this one. What happened to the Golden Bough Society?”

Dawes looked blank.

“Loca Greiga?” Miller asked. “Sohiro?”

Dawes opened his mouth, closed it. Miller dropped his beer bottle into the recycler.

“Nothing personal, friend,” he said, “but your investigative techniques aren’t impressing me. What makes you think you can find her?”

“It’s not a fair test,” Dawes said. “Give me a few days, I’ll get answers for you.”

“Talk to me then. I’ll try not to start an all-out war while you do, but I’m not letting go of Julie. You can go now.”

Dawes rose. He looked sour.

“You’re making a mistake,” he said.

“Won’t be my first.”

After the man left, Miller sat at his table. He’d been stupid. Worse, he’d been self-indulgent. Drinking himself into a stupor instead of doing the work. Instead of finding Julie. But he knew more now. The *Scopuli*. The *Canterbury*. More lines between the dots.

He cleaned away his bottles, took a shower, and pulled up his terminal, searching what there was about Julie’s ship. After an hour, a new thought occurred to him, a small fear that grew the more he looked at it. Near midnight, he put a call through to Havelock’s hole.

His partner took two full minutes to answer. When he did, his image was wild-haired and bleary-eyed.

“Miller?”

“Havelock. You have any vacation time saved up?”

“A little.”

“Sick leave?”

“Sure,” Havelock said.

“Take it,” Miller said. “Take it now. Get off station. Someplace safe if you can find it. Someplace they’re not going to start killing Earthers for shits and giggles if things go pear-shaped.”

“I don’t understand. What are you talking about?”

“I had a little visit with an OPA agent tonight. He was trying to talk me into dropping my kidnap job. I think… I think he’s nervous. I think he’s scared.”

Havelock was silent for a moment while the words filtered into his sleep-drunk mind.

“Jesus,” he said. “What scares the OPA?”

Chapter Thirteen: Holden

Holden froze, watching the blood pump from Shed's neck, then whip away like smoke into an exhaust fan. The sounds of combat began to fade as the air was sucked out of the room. His ears throbbed and then hurt like someone had put ice picks in them. As he fought with his couch restraints, he glanced over at Alex. The pilot was yelling something, but it didn't carry through the thin air. Naomi and Amos had gotten out of their couches already, kicked off, and were flying across the room to the two holes. Amos had a plastic dinner tray in one hand. Naomi, a white three-ring binder. Holden stared at them for the half second it took to understand what they were doing. The world narrowed, his peripheral vision all stars and darkness.

By the time he'd gotten free, Amos and Naomi had already covered the holes with their makeshift patches. The room was filled with a high-pitched whistle as the air tried to force its way out through the imperfect seals. Holden's sight began to return as the air pressure started to rise. He was panting hard, gasping for breath. Someone slowly turned the room's volume knob back up and Naomi's yells for help became audible.

"Jim, open the emergency locker!" she screamed.

She was pointing at a small red-and-yellow panel on the bulkhead near his crash couch. Years of shipboard training made a path through the anoxia and depressurization, and he yanked the tab on the locker's seal and pulled the door open. Inside were a white first aid kit marked with the ancient red-cross symbol, half a dozen oxygen masks, and a sealed bag of hardened plastic disks attached to a glue gun. The emergency-seal kit. He snatched it.

"Just the gun," Naomi yelled at him. He wasn't sure if her voice sounded distant because of the thin air or because the pressure drop had blown his eardrums.

Holden yanked the gun free from the bag of patches and threw it at her. She ran a bead of instant sealing glue around the edge of her three-ring binder. She tossed the gun to Amos, who caught it with an effortless backhand motion and put a seal around his dinner tray. The whistling stopped, replaced by the hiss of the atmosphere system as it labored to bring the pressure back up to normal. Fifteen seconds.

Everyone looked at Shed. Without the vacuum, his blood was pouring out into a floating red sphere just above his neck, like a hideous cartoon replacement for his head.

"Jesus Christ, Boss," Amos said, looking away from Shed to Naomi. He snapped his teeth closed with an audible click and shook his head.

“What… ”

“Gauss round,” Alex said. “Those ships have rail guns.”

“*Belt* ships with *rail* guns?” Amos said. “Did they get a fucking navy and no one told me?”

“Jim, the hallway outside and the cabin on the other side are both in vacuum,” Naomi said. “The ship’s compromised.”

Holden started to respond, then caught a good look at the binder Naomi had glued over the breach. The white cover was stamped with black letters that read MCRN EMERGENCY PROCEDURES. He had to suppress a laugh that would almost certainly go manic on him.

“Jim,” Naomi said, her voice worried.

“I’m okay, Naomi,” Holden replied, then took a deep breath. “How long do those patches hold?”

Naomi shrugged with her hands, then started pulling her hair behind her head and tying it up with a red elastic band.

“Longer than the air will last. If everything around us is in vacuum, that means the cabin’s running on emergency bottles. No recycling. I don’t know how much each room has, but it won’t be more than a couple hours.”

“Kinda makes you wish we’d worn our fucking suits, don’t it?” Amos asked.

“Wouldn’t have mattered,” Alex said. “We’d come over here in our enviro suits, they’d just have taken ’em away.”

“Could have tried,” Amos said.

“Well, if you’d like to go back in time and do it over, be my guest, partner.”

Naomi sharply said, “Hey,” but then nothing more.

No one was talking about Shed. They were working hard not to look at the body. Holden cleared his throat to get everyone’s attention, then floated to Shed’s couch, drawing their eyes with him. He paused a moment, letting everyone get a good look at the decapitated body, then pulled a blanket from the storage drawer beneath the couch and strapped it down over Shed’s body with the couch’s restraints.

“Shed’s been killed. We’re in deep peril. Arguing won’t extend our lives one second,” Holden said, looking at each member of his crew in turn. “What will?”

No one spoke. Holden turned to Naomi first.

“Naomi, what will keep us alive longer that we can do right now?” he asked.

“I’ll see if I can find the emergency air. The room’s built for six, and there’re only… there are four of us. I might be able to turn the flow down and stretch it longer.”

“Good. Thank you. Alex?”

“If there’s anyone other than us, they’ll be lookin’ for survivors. I’ll

start poundin' on the bulkhead. They won't hear it in the vacuum, but if there're cabins with air, the sound'll travel down the metal."

"Good plan. I refuse to believe we're the only ones left on this ship," Holden said, then turned to Amos. "Amos?"

"Lemme check on that comm panel. Might be able to get the bridge or damage control or… shit, *something,*" Amos replied.

"Thanks. I'd love to let someone know we're still here," Holden said.

People moved off to work while Holden floated in the air next to Shed. Naomi began yanking access panels off the bulkheads. Alex, hands pressed against a couch for leverage, lay on the deck and began to kick the bulkhead with his boots. The room vibrated slightly with each booming kick. Amos pulled a multi-tool out of his pocket and began taking the comm panel apart.

When Holden was sure everyone was busy, he put one hand on Shed's shoulder, just below the blanket's spreading red stain.

"I'm sorry," he whispered to the body. His eyes burned and he pressed them into the back of his thumbs.

The comm unit was hanging out of the bulkhead on wires when it buzzed once, loudly. Amos yelped and pushed off hard enough to fly across the room. Holden caught him, wrenching his shoulder by trying to arrest the momentum of 120 kilos of Earther mechanic. The comm buzzed again. Holden let Amos go and floated to it. A yellow LED glowed next to the unit's white button. Holden pressed the button. The comm crackled to life with Lieutenant Kelly's voice.

"Move away from the hatch, we're coming in," he said.

"Grab something!" Holden yelled to the crew, then grabbed a couch restraint and wrapped it around his hand and forearm.

When the hatch opened, Holden expected all the air to rush out. Instead, there was a loud crack and the pressure dropped slightly for a second. Outside in the corridor, thick sheets of plastic had been sealed to the walls, creating an ad hoc airlock. The walls of the new chamber bowed out dangerously with the air pressure, but they held. Inside the newly created lock, Lieutenant Kelly and three of his marines wore heavy vacuum-rated armor and carried enough weaponry to fight several minor wars.

The marines moved quickly into the room, weapons ready, and then sealed the hatch behind them. One of them tossed a large bag at Holden.

"Five vac suits. Get them on," Kelly said. His eyes moved to the bloody blanket covering Shed, then to the two improvised patches. "Casualty?"

"Our medic, Shed Garvey," Holden replied.

"Yeah. What the fuck?" Amos said loudly. "Who's out there shooting the shit out of your fancy boat?"

Naomi and Alex said nothing but started pulling the suits from the bag and handing them out.

"I don't know," Kelly said. "But we're leaving right now. I've been ordered to get you off this ship in an escape craft. We've got less than ten minutes to make it to the hangar bay, take possession of a ship, and get out of this combat area. Dress fast."

Holden put on his suit, the implications of their evacuation racing through his mind.

"Lieutenant, is the ship coming apart?" he asked.

"Not yet. But we're being boarded."

"Then why are we leaving?"

"We're losing."

Kelly didn't tap his foot while waiting for them to seal into their suits; Holden guessed this was only because the marines had their magnetic boots turned on. As soon as everyone had given the thumbs-up, Kelly did a quick radio check on each suit, then headed back into the corridor. With eight people in it, four of them in powered armor, the mini-airlock was tight. Kelly pulled a heavy knife from a sheath on his chest and slashed the plastic barrier open in one quick movement. The hatch behind them slammed shut, and the air in the corridor vanished in a soundless ripple of plastic flaps. Kelly charged into the corridor with the crew scrambling to keep up.

"We are moving with all speed to the keel elevator banks," Kelly said through the radio link. "They're locked down because of the boarding alarm, but I can get the doors open on one and we'll float down the shaft to the hangar bay. Everything is on the double. If you see boarders, do not stop. Keep moving at all times. We'll handle the hostiles. Roger that?"

"Roger, Lieutenant," Holden gasped out. "Why board you?"

"The command information center," Alex said. "It's the holy grail. Codes, deployments, computer cores, the works. Takin' a flagship's CIC is a strategist's wet dream."

"Cut the chatter," Kelly said. Holden ignored him.

"That means they'll blow the core rather than let that happen, right?"

"Yep," Alex replied. "Standard ops for boarders. Marines hold the bridge, CIC, and engineering. If any of the three is breached, the other two flip the switch. The ship turns into a star for a few seconds."

"Standard ops," Kelly growled. "Those are my friends."

"Sorry, El Tee," Alex replied. "I served on the *Bandon.* Don't mean to make light."

They turned a corner and the elevator bank came into view. All eight elevators were closed and sealed. The heavy pressure doors had slammed shut when the ship was holed.

“Gomez, run the bypass,” Kelly said. “Mole, Dookie, watch those corridors.”

Two of the marines spread out, watching the hallways through their gun sights. The third moved to one of the elevator doors and started doing something complicated to the controls. Holden motioned his crew to the wall, out of the firing lines. The deck vibrated slightly from time to time beneath his feet. The enemy ships wouldn’t still be firing, not with their boarders inside. It must be small-arms fire and light explosives. But as they stood there in the perfect quiet of vacuum, everything that was happening took on a distant and surreal feeling. Holden recognized that his mind wasn’t working the way it should be. Trauma reaction. The destruction of the *Canterbury,* the deaths of Ade and McDowell. And now someone had killed Shed in his bunk. It was too much; he couldn’t process it. He felt the scene around him grow more and more distant.

Holden looked behind him at Naomi, Alex, and Amos. His crew. They stared back, faces ashen and ghostly in the green light of their suit displays. Gomez pumped his fist in triumph as the outer pressure door slid open, revealing the elevator doors. Kelly gestured to his men.

The one called Mole turned around and started to walk to the elevator when his face disintegrated in a spray of pebble-shaped bits of armored glass and blood. His armored torso and the corridor bulkhead beside him bloomed in a hundred small detonations and puffs of smoke. His body jerked and swayed, attached to the floor by magnetic boots.

Holden’s sense of unreality washed away in adrenaline. The fire spraying across the wall and Mole’s body was high-explosive rounds from a rapid-fire weapon. The comm channel filled with yelling from the marines and Holden’s own crew. To Holden’s left, Gomez yanked the elevator doors open using the augmented strength of his powered armor, exposing the empty shaft behind them.

“Inside!” Kelly shouted. “Everybody inside!”

Holden held back, pushing Naomi in, and then Alex. The last marine —the one Kelly had called Dookie—fired his rifle on full auto at some target around the corner from Holden. When the weapon ran dry, the marine dropped to one knee and ejected the clip in the same motion. Almost faster than Holden could follow, he pulled a new magazine from his harness and slapped it into his weapon. He was firing again less than two seconds after he’d run out.

Naomi yelled at Holden to get into the elevator shaft, and then a viselike hand grabbed his shoulder, yanked him off his magnetic grip on the floor, and hurled him through the open elevator doors.

“Get killed when I’m not babysitting,” Lieutenant Kelly barked.

They shoved off the walls of the elevator shaft and flew down the

long tunnel toward the aft of the ship. Holden kept looking back at the open door, receding into the distance behind them.

"Dookie isn't following us," he said.

"He's covering our exit," Kelly replied.

"So we better get away," Gomez added. "Make it mean something."

Kelly, at the head of the group, grabbed at a rung on the wall of the shaft and came to a jerking stop. Everyone else followed suit.

"Here's our exit. Gomez, go check it out," Kelly said. "Holden, here's the plan. We'll be taking one of the corvettes from the hangar bay."

That made sense to Holden. The corvette class was a light frigate. A fleet escort vessel, it was the smallest naval ship equipped with an Epstein drive. It would be fast enough to travel anywhere in the system and outrun most threats. Its secondary role was as a torpedo bomber, so it would also have teeth. Holden nodded inside his helmet at Kelly, then gestured for him to continue. Kelly waited until Gomez had finished opening the elevator doors and gone into the hangar bay.

"Okay, I've got the key card and activation code to get us inside and the ship fired up. I'll be heading straight for it, so all of you stick right on my ass. Make sure your boot mags are off. We're going to push off the wall and fly to it, so aim straight or you miss your ride. Everyone with me?"

Affirmative replies all around.

"Outstanding. Gomez, what's it look like out there?"

"Trouble, El Tee. Half a dozen boarders looking over the ships in the hangar. Powered armor, zero-g maneuvering packs, and heavy weapons. Loaded for bear," Gomez whispered back. People always whispered when they were hiding. Wrapped in a space suit and surrounded by vacuum, Gomez could have been lighting fireworks inside his armor and no one would have heard it, but he whispered.

"We run for the ship and shoot our way through," Kelly said. "Gomez, I'm bringing the civvies in ten seconds. You're covering fire. Shoot and displace. Try and make them think you're a small platoon."

"You callin' me small, sir?" Gomez said. "Six dead assholes coming up."

Holden, Amos, Alex, and Naomi followed Kelly out of the elevator shaft and into the hangar bay and stopped behind a stack of military-green crates. Holden peeked over them, spotting the boarders immediately. They were in two groups of three near the *Knight,* one group walking on top of it and the other on the deck below it. Their armor was flat black. Holden hadn't seen the design before.

Kelly pointed at them and looked at Holden. Holden nodded back. Kelly pointed across the hangar at a squat black frigate about twenty-five meters away, halfway between them and the *Knight.* He held up his left hand and began counting down from five on his fingers. At

two, the room strobed like a disco: Gomez opening fire from a position ten meters from their own. The first barrage hit two of the boarders on top of the *Knight* and hurled them spinning off. A heartbeat later, a second burst was fired five meters from where Holden had seen the first. He would have sworn it was two different men.

Kelly folded up the last finger on his hand, planted his feet on the wall, and pushed off toward their corvette. Holden waited for Alex, Amos, and Naomi, then shoved off last. By the time he was in motion, Gomez was firing from a new location. One of the boarders on the deck pointed a large weapon toward the muzzle flash from Gomez's gun. Gomez and the crate he'd been taking cover behind disappeared in fire and shrapnel.

They were halfway to the ship and Holden was starting to think they might make it when a line of smoke crossed the room and intersected with Kelly, and the lieutenant disappeared in a flash of light.

Chapter Fourteen: Miller

The *Xinglong* died stupid. Afterward, everyone knew she was one of thousands of small-time rock-hopping prospector ships. The Belt was lousy with them: five- or six-family operations that had scraped together enough for a down payment and set up operations. When it happened, they'd been three payments behind, and their bank—Consolidated Holdings and Investments—had put a lien on the ship. Which, common wisdom had it, was why they had disabled her transponder. Just honest folks with a rust bucket to call their own trying to keep flying.

If you were going to make a poster of the Belter's dream, it would have been the *Xinglong*.

The *Scipio Africanus,* a patrol destroyer, was due to head back down toward Mars at the end of its two-year tour of the Belt. They both headed for a captured cometary body a few hundred thousand kilometers from Chiron to top off their water.

When the prospecting ship first came in range, the *Scipio* saw a fast-moving ship running dark and headed more or less in their direction. The official Martian press releases all said that the *Scipio* had tried repeatedly to hail her. The OPA pirate casts all said it was crap and that no listening station in the Belt had heard anything like that. Everyone agreed that the *Scipio* had opened its point defense cannons and turned the prospecting ship into glowing slag.

The reaction had been as predictable as elementary physics. The Martians were diverting another couple dozen ships to help "maintain order." The OPA's shriller talking heads called for open war, and fewer and fewer of the independent sites and casts were disagreeing with them. The great, implacable clockwork of war ticked one step closer to open fighting.

And someone on Ceres had put a Martian-born citizen named Enrique Dos Santos through eight or nine hours of torture and nailed the remains to a wall near sector eleven's water reclamation works. They identified him by the terminal that had been left on the floor along with the man's wedding ring and a thin faux-leather wallet with his credit access data and thirty thousand Europa-script new yen. The dead Martian had been affixed to the wall with a single-charge prospector's spike. Five hours afterward, the air recyclers were still laboring to get the acid smell out. The forensics team had taken their samples. They were about ready to cut the poor bastard down.

It always surprised Miller how peaceful dead people looked. However godawful the circumstances, the slack calm that came at the

end looked like sleep. It made him wonder if when his turn came, he'd actually feel that last relaxation.

"Surveillance cameras?" he said.

"Been out for three days," his new partner said. "Kids busted 'em."

Octavia Muss was originally from crimes against persons, back before Star Helix split violence up into smaller specialties. From there, she'd been on the rape squad. Then a couple of months of crimes against children. If the woman still had a soul, it had been pressed thin enough to see through. Her eyes never registered anything more than mild surprise.

"We know which kids?"

"Some punks from upstairs," she said. "Booked, fined, released into the wild."

"We should round 'em back up," Miller said. "It'd be interesting to know whether someone paid them to take out these particular cameras."

"I'd bet against it."

"Then whoever did this had to know that these cameras were busted."

"Someone in maintenance?"

"Or a cop."

Muss smacked her lips and shrugged. She'd come from three generations in the Belt. She had family on ships like the one the *Scipio* had killed. The skin and bone and gristle hanging in front of them were no surprise to her. You dropped a hammer under thrust, and it fell to the deck. Your government slaughtered six families of ethnic Chinese prospectors, someone pinned you to the living rock of Ceres with a three-foot titanium alloy spike. Same same.

"There's going to be consequences," Miller said, meaning *This isn't a corpse, it's a billboard. It's a call to war.*

"There ain't," Muss said. *The war is here anyway, banner or no.*

"Yeah," Miller said. "You're right. There ain't."

"You want to do next of kin? I'll go take a look at outlying video. They didn't burn his fingers off here in the corridor, so they had to haul him in from somewhere."

"Yeah," Miller said. "I've got a sympathy form letter I can fire off. Wife?"

"Don't know," she said. "Haven't looked."

Back at the station house, Miller sat alone at his desk. Muss already had her own desk, two cubicles over and customized the way she liked it. Havelock's desk was empty and cleaned twice over, as if the custodial services had wanted the smell of Earth off their good Belter chair. Miller pulled up the dead man's file, found the next of kin. Jun-Yee Dos Santos, working on Ganymede. Married six years. No kids.

Well, there was something to be glad of, at least. If you were going to die, at least you shouldn't leave a mark.

He navigated to the form letter, dropped in the new widow's name and contact address. *Dear Mrs. Dos Santos, I am very sorry to have to tell you* blah blah blah. *Your* [he spun through the menu] *husband was a valued and respected member of the Ceres community, and I assure you that everything possible will be done to see that her* [Miller toggled that] *his killer or killers will be brought to answer for this. Yours…*

It was inhuman. It was impersonal and cold and as empty as vacuum. The hunk of flesh on that corridor wall had been a real man with passions and fears, just like anyone else. Miller wanted to wonder what it said about him that he could ignore that fact so easily, but the truth was he knew. He sent the message and tried not to dwell on the pain it was about to cause.

The board was thick. The incident count was twice what it should have been. *This is what it looks like,* he thought. No riots. No hole-by-hole military action or marines in the corridors. Just a lot of unsolved homicides.

Then he corrected himself: *This is what it looks like so far.*

It didn't make his next task any easier.

Shaddid was in her office.

"What can I do for you?" she asked.

"I need to make some requisitions for interrogation transcripts," he said. "But it's a little irregular. I was thinking it might be better if it came through you."

Shaddid sat back in her chair.

"I'll look at it," she said. "What are we trying to get?"

Miller nodded, as if by signaling *yes* himself, he could get her to say the same.

"Jim Holden. The Earther from the *Canterbury*. Mars should be picking his people up around now, and I need to petition for the debriefing transcripts."

"You have a case that goes back to the *Canterbury*?"

"Yeah," he said. "Seems like I do."

"Tell me," she said. "Tell me now."

"It's the side job. Julie Mao. I've been looking into it… "

"I saw your report."

"So you know she's associated with the OPA. From what I've found, it looks like she was on a freighter that was doing courier runs for them."

"You have proof of that?"

"I have an OPA guy that said as much."

"On the record?"

"No," Miller said. "It was informal."

"And it tied into the Martian navy killing the *Canterbury* how?"

"She was on the *Scopuli,*" Miller said. "It was used as bait to stop the *Canterbury*. The thing is, you look at the broadcasts Holden makes, he talks about finding it with a Mars Navy beacon and no crew."

"And you think there's something in there that'll help you?"

"Won't know until I see it," Miller said. "But if Julie wasn't on that freighter, then someone had to take her off."

Shaddid's smile didn't reach her eyes.

"And you would like to ask the Martian navy to please hand over whatever they got from Holden."

"If he saw something on that boat, something that'll give us an idea what happened to Julie and the other—"

"You aren't thinking this through," Shaddid said. "The Mars Navy killed the *Canterbury*. They did it to provoke a reaction from the Belt so they'd have an excuse to roll in and take us over. The only reason they're 'debriefing' the survivors is so that no one could get to the poor bastards first. Holden and his crew are either dead or getting their minds cored out by Martian interrogation specialists right now."

"We can't be sure… "

"And even if I could get a full record of what they said as each toenail got ripped off, it would do you exactly no good, Miller. The Martian navy isn't going to ask about the *Scopuli.* They know good and well what happened to the crew. They planted the *Scopuli.*"

"Is that Star Helix's official stand?" Miller asked. The words were barely out of his mouth before he saw they'd been a mistake. Shaddid's face closed down like a light going out. Now that he'd said it, he saw the implied threat he'd just made.

"I'm just pointing out the source reliability issue," Shaddid said. "You don't go to the suspect and ask where they think you should look next. And the Juliette Mao retrieval isn't your first priority."

"I'm not saying it is," Miller said, chagrined to hear the defensiveness in his voice.

"We have a board out there that's full and getting fuller. Our first priorities are safety and continuity of services. If what you're doing isn't directly related to that, there are better things for you to be doing."

"This war—"

"Isn't our job," Shaddid said. "Our job is Ceres. Get me a final report on Juliette Mao. I'll send it through channels. We've done what we could."

"I don't think—"

"I do," Shaddid said. "We've done what we could. Now stop being a pussy, get your ass out there, and catch bad guys. Detective."

"Yes, Captain," Miller said.

Muss was sitting at Miller's desk when he got back to it, a cup in her hand that was either strong tea or weak coffee. She nodded toward his desktop monitor. On it, three Belters—two men and one woman—were coming out of a warehouse door, an orange plastic shipping container carried between them. Miller raised his eyebrows.

"Employed by an independent gas-hauling company. Nitrogen, oxygen. Basic atmospherics. Nothing exotic. Looks like they had the poor bastard in one of the company warehouses. I've sent forensics over to see if we can get any blood splatters for confirmation."

"Good work," Miller said.

Muss shrugged. *Adequate work,* she seemed to say.

"Where are the perps?" Miller asked.

"Shipped out yesterday," she said. "Flight plan logs them as headed for Io."

"Io?"

"Earth-Mars Coalition central," Muss said. "Want to put any money on whether they actually show up there?"

"Sure," Miller said. "I'll lay you fifty that they don't."

Muss actually laughed.

"I've put them on the alert system," she said. "Anyplace they land, the locals will have a heads-up and a tracking number for the Dos Santos thing."

"So case closed," Miller said.

"Chalk another one up for the good guys," Muss agreed.

The rest of the day was hectic. Three assaults, two of them overtly political and one domestic. Muss and Miller cleared all three from the board before the end of shift. There would be more by tomorrow.

After he clocked out, Miller stopped at a food cart near one of the tube stations for a bowl of vat rice and textured protein that approximated teriyaki chicken. All around him on the tube, normal citizens of Ceres read their newsfeeds and listened to music. A young couple half a car up from him leaned close to each other, murmuring and giggling. They might have been sixteen. Seventeen. He saw the boy's wrist snake up under the girl's shirt. She didn't protest. An old woman directly across from Miller slept, her head lolling against the wall of the car, her snores almost delicate.

These people were what it was all about, Miller told himself. Normal people living small lives in a bubble of rock surrounded by hard vacuum. If they let the station turn into a riot zone, let order fail, all these lives would get turned into kibble like a kitten in a meat grinder. Making sure it didn't happen was for people like him, Muss, even Shaddid.

So, a small voice said in the back of his mind, *why isn't it your job to stop Mars from dropping a nuke and cracking Ceres like an egg? What's*

the bigger threat to that guy standing over there, a few unlicensed whores or a Belt at war with Mars?

What was the harm that could come from knowing what happened to the *Scopuli?*

But of course he knew the answer to that. He couldn't judge how dangerous the truth was until he knew it—which was itself a fine reason to keep going.

The OPA man, Anderson Dawes, was sitting on a cloth folding chair outside Miller's hole, reading a book. It was a real book—onionskin pages bound in what might have been actual leather. Miller had seen pictures of them before; the idea of that much weight for a single megabyte of data struck him as decadent.

"Detective."

"Mr. Dawes."

"I was hoping we could talk."

Miller was glad, as they went inside together, that he'd cleaned up a little. All the beer bottles had gone to recycler. The tables and cabinets were dusted. The cushions on the chairs had all been mended or replaced. As Dawes took his seat, Miller realized he'd done the housework in anticipation of this meeting. He hadn't realized it until now.

Dawes put his book on the table, dug in his jacket pocket, and slid a thin black filmdrive across the table. Miller picked it up.

"What am I going to see on this?" he asked.

"Nothing you can't confirm in the records," Dawes answered.

"Anything fabricated?"

"Yes," Dawes said. His grin did nothing to improve his appearance. "But not by us. You asked about the police riot gear. It was signed for by a Sergeant Pauline Trikoloski for transfer to special services unit twenty-three."

"Special services twenty-three?"

"Yes," Dawes said. "It doesn't exist. Nor does Trikoloski. The equipment was all boxed up, signed for, and delivered to a dock. The freighter in the berth at the time was registered to the Corporaçõ do Gato Preto."

"Black Cat?"

"You know them?"

"Import-export, same as everyone else," Miller said with a shrug. "We investigated them as a possible front for the Loca Greiga. Never tied them down, though."

"You were right."

"You prove it?"

"Not my job," Dawes said. "But this might interest you. Automated docking logs for the ship when she left here and when she arrived on

Ganymede. She's three tons lighter, not even counting reaction mass consumption. And the transit time is longer than the orbital mechanics projections."

"Someone met her," Miller said. "Transferred the gear to another ship."

"There's your answer," Dawes said. "Both of them. The riot gear was taken off the station by local organized crime. There aren't records to support it, but I think it's safe to assume that they also shipped out the personnel to use that gear."

"Where to?"

Dawes lifted his hands. Miller nodded. They were off station. Case closed. Another one for the good guys.

Damn.

"I've kept my part of our bargain," Dawes said. "You asked for information. I've gotten it. Now, are you going to keep your end?"

"Drop the Mao investigation," Miller said. It wasn't a question, and Dawes didn't act is if it were. Miller leaned back in his chair.

Juliette Andromeda Mao. Inner system heiress turned OPA courier. Pinnace racer. Brown belt, aiming for black.

"Sure, what the hell," he said. "It's not like I would have shipped her back home if I'd found her."

"No?"

Miller shifted his hands in a gesture that meant *Of course not.*

"She's a good kid," Miller said. "How would you feel if you were all grown up and Mommy could still pull you back home by your ear? It was a bullshit job from the start."

Dawes smiled again. This time it actually did help a little.

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Detective. And I won't forget the rest of our agreement. When we find her, I *will* tell you. You've got my word on it."

"I appreciate that," Miller said.

There was a moment of silence. Miller couldn't decide if it was companionable or awkward. Maybe there was room for both. Dawes rose, put out his hand. Miller shook it. Dawes left. Two cops working for different sides. Maybe they had something in common.

Didn't mean Miller was uncomfortable lying to the man.

He opened his terminal's encryption program, routed it to his communication suite, and started talking into the camera.

"We haven't met, sir, but I hope you'll find a few minutes to help me out. I'm Detective Miller with Star Helix Security. I'm on the Ceres security contract, and I've been tasked with finding your daughter. I've got a couple questions."

Chapter Fifteen: Holden

Holden grabbed for Naomi. He struggled to orient himself as the two of them spun across the bay with nothing to push off of and nothing to arrest their flight. They were in the middle of the room with no cover.

The blast had hurled Kelly five meters through the air and into the side of a packing crate, where he was floating now, one magnetic boot connected to the side of the container, the other struggling to connect with the deck. Amos had been blown down, and lay flat on the floor, his lower leg stuck out at an impossible angle. Alex crouched at his side.

Holden craned his neck, looking toward the attackers. There was the boarder with the grenade launcher who had blasted Kelly, lining up on them for the killing shot. *We're dead,* Holden thought. Naomi made an obscene gesture.

The man with the grenade launcher shuddered and dissolved in a spray of blood and small detonations.

"Get to the ship!" Gomez screamed from the radio. His voice was grating and high, half shrieking pain and half battle ecstasy.

Holden pulled the tether line off Naomi's suit.

"What are you…?" she began.

"Trust me," he said, then put his feet into her stomach and shoved off, hard. He hit the deck while she spun toward the ceiling. He kicked on his boot mags and then yanked the tether to pull her down to him.

The room strobed with sustained machine gun fire. Holden said, "Stay low," and ran as quickly as his magnetic boots would allow toward Alex and Amos. The mechanic moved his limbs feebly, so he was still alive. Holden realized he still had the end of Naomi's tether in his hand, so he clipped it on to a loop on his suit. No more getting separated.

Holden lifted Amos off the deck, then checked the inertia. The mechanic grunted and muttered something obscene. Holden attached Amos' tether to his suit too. He'd carry the whole crew if that was what it took. Without saying a word, Alex clipped his tether to Holden and gave him a weary thumbs-up.

"That was… I mean, *fuck,*" Alex said.

"Yeah," Holden said.

"Jim," Naomi said. "Look!"

Holden followed her gaze. Kelly was staggering toward them. His armor was visibly crushed on the left side of his torso, and hydraulic fluid leaked from his suit into a trail of droplets floating behind him, but he was moving—toward the frigate.

“Okay,” Holden said. “Let’s go.”

The five of them moved as a group to the ship, the air around them filled with pieces of packing crates blown apart by the ongoing battle. A wasp stung Holden’s arm, and his suit’s head-up display informed him that it had sealed a minor breach. He felt something warm trickle down his bicep.

Gomez shouted like a madman over the radio as he dashed around the outer edge of the bay, firing wildly. The return fire was constant. Holden saw the marine hit again and again, small explosions and ablative clouds coming off his suit until Holden could hardly believe that there could be anything inside it still living. But Gomez kept the enemy’s attention, and Holden and the crew were able to limp up to the half cover of the corvette’s airlock.

Kelly pulled a small metal card from a pocket on his armor. A swipe of the card opened the outer door, and Holden pulled Amos’ floating body inside. Naomi, Alex, and the wounded marine came in after, staring at each other in shocked disbelief as the airlock cycled and the inner doors opened.

“I can’t believe we… ” Alex said; then his voice trailed off.

“Talk about it later,” Kelly barked. “Alex Kamal, you served on MCRN ships. Can you fly this thing?”

“Sure, El Tee,” Alex replied, then visibly straightened. “Why me?”

“Our other pilot’s outside getting killed. Take this,” Kelly said, handing him the metal card. “The rest of you, get strapped in. We’ve lost a lot of time.”

Up close, the damage to Kelly’s armor was even more apparent. He had to have severe injuries to his chest. And not all the liquid coming out of the suit was hydraulic fluid. There was definitely blood as well.

“Let me help you,” Holden said, reaching for him.

“Don’t touch me,” Kelly said, with an anger that took Holden by surprise. “You get strapped in, and you shut the fuck up. Now.”

Holden didn’t argue. He unhooked the tethers from his suit and helped Naomi maneuver Amos to the crash couches and strap him in. Kelly stayed on the deck above, but his voice came over the ship’s comm.

“Mr. Kamal, are we ready to fly?” he said.

“Roger that, El Tee. The reactor was already hot when we got here.”

“The *Tachi* was the ready standby. That’s why we’re taking her. Now go. As soon as we clear the hangar, full throttle.”

“Roger,” Alex said.

Gravity returned in tiny bursts at random directions as Alex lifted the ship off the deck and spun it toward the hangar door. Holden finished putting on his straps and checked to see that Naomi and Amos were squared away. The mechanic was moaning and holding on

to the edge of the couch with a death grip.

"You still with us, Amos?" Holden said.

"Fan-fucking-tastic, Cap."

"Oh shit, I can see Gomez," Alex said over the comm. "He's down. Aw, you goddammed bastards! They're shootin' him while he's down! Son of a bitch!"

The ship stopped moving, and Alex said in a quiet voice, "Suck on this, asshole."

The ship vibrated for half a second, then paused before continuing toward the lock.

"Point defense cannons?" Holden asked.

"Summary roadside justice," Alex grunted back.

Holden was imagining what several hundred rounds of Teflon-coated tungsten steel going five thousand meters per second would do to human bodies when Alex threw down the throttle and a roomful of elephants swan dived onto his chest.

Holden woke in zero g. His eye sockets and testicles ached, so they'd been at high thrust for a while. The wall terminal next to him said it had been almost half an hour. Naomi was moving in her couch, but Amos was unconscious, and blood was coming out of a hole in his suit at an alarming rate.

"Naomi, check Amos," Holden croaked, his throat aching with the effort. "Alex, report."

"The *Donnie* went up behind us, Cap. Guess the marines didn't hold. She's gone," Alex said in a subdued voice.

"The six attacking ships?"

"I haven't seen any sign of them since the explosion. I'd guess they're toast."

Holden nodded to himself. Summary roadside justice, indeed. Boarding a ship was one of the riskiest maneuvers in naval combat. It was basically a race between the boarders rushing to the engine room and the collective will of those who had their fingers on the self-destruct button. After even one look at Captain Yao, Holden could have told them who'd lose *that* race.

Still. Someone had thought it was worth the risk.

Holden pulled his straps off and floated over to Amos. Naomi had opened an emergency kit and was cutting the mechanic's suit off with a pair of heavy scissors. The hole had been punched out by a jagged

end of Amos' broken tibia when the suit had pushed against it at twelve g.

When she'd finished cutting the suit away, Naomi blanched at the mass of blood and gore that Amos' lower leg had turned into.

"What do we do?" Holden asked.

Naomi just stared at him, then barked out a harsh laugh.

"I have no idea," she said.

"But you—" Holden started. She talked right over him.

"If he were made of metal, I'd just hammer him straight and then weld everything into place," she said.

"I—"

"But he *isn't* made out of ship parts," she continued, her voice rising into a yell, "so why are you asking *me* what to do?"

Holden held up his hands in a placating gesture.

"Okay, got it. Let's just stop the bleeding for now, all right?"

"If Alex gets killed, are you going to ask me to fly the ship too?"

Holden started to answer and then stopped. She was right. Whenever he didn't know what to do, he handed off to Naomi. He'd been doing it for years. She was smart, capable, usually unflappable. She'd become a crutch, and she'd been through all the same trauma he had. If he didn't start paying attention, he'd break her, and he needed not to do that.

"You're right. I'll take care of Amos," he said. "You go up and check on Kelly. I'll be there in a few minutes."

Naomi stared at him until her breathing slowed, then said, "Okay," and headed to the crew ladder.

Holden sprayed Amos' leg with coagulant booster and wrapped it in gauze from the first aid kit. Then he called up the ship's database on the wall terminal and did a search on compound fractures. He was reading it with growing dismay when Naomi called.

"Kelly's dead," she said, her voice flat.

Holden's stomach dropped, and he gave himself three breaths to get the panic out of his voice.

"Okay. I'll need your help setting this bone. Come on back down. Alex? Give me half a g of thrust while we work on Amos."

"Any particular direction, Cap?" Alex asked.

"I don't care, just give me half a g and stay off the radio till I say so."

Naomi dropped back down the ladder well as the gravity started to come up.

"It looks like every rib on the left side of Kelly's body was broken," she said. "Thrust g probably punctured all his organs."

"He had to know that was going to happen," Holden said.

"Yeah."

It was easy to make fun of the marines when they weren't listening. In Holden's navy days, making fun of jarheads was as natural as cussing. But four marines had died getting him off the *Donnager,* and three of them had made a conscious decision to do so. Holden promised himself that he'd never make fun of them again.

"We need to pull the bone straight before we set it. Hold him still, and I'll pull on his foot. Let me know when the bone has retracted and lined up again."

Naomi started to protest.

"I know you're not a doctor. Just best guess," Holden said.

It was one of the most horrible things Holden had ever done. Amos woke up screaming during the procedure. He had to pull the leg out twice, because the first time the bones didn't line up, and when he let go, the jagged end of the tibia popped back out the hole in a spray of blood. Fortunately, Amos passed out after that and they were able to make the second attempt without the screaming. It seemed to work. Holden sprayed the wound down with antiseptics and coagulants. He stapled the hole closed and slapped a growth-stimulating bandage over it, then finished up with a quick-form air-cast and an antibiotic patch on the mechanic's thigh.

Afterward he collapsed onto the deck and gave in to the shakes. Naomi climbed into her couch and sobbed. It was the first time Holden had ever seen her cry.

Holden, Alex, and Naomi floated in a loose triangle around the crash couch where Lieutenant Kelly's body lay. Below, Amos was in a heavily sedated sleep. The *Tachi* drifted through space toward no particular destination. For the first time in a long time, no one followed.

Holden knew the other two were waiting for him. Waiting to hear how he was going to save them. They looked at him expectantly. He tried to appear calm and thoughtful. Inside, he panicked. He had no idea where to go. No idea what to do. Ever since they'd found the *Scopuli,* everywhere that should have been safe had turned into a death trap. The *Canterbury,* the *Donnager.* Holden was terrified of going *anywhere,* for fear that it would be blown up moments later.

Do something, a mentor of a decade earlier said to his young officers. *It doesn't have to be right, it just has to be something.*

"Someone is going to investigate what happened to the *Donnager,*"

Holden said. “Martian ships are speeding to that spot as we speak. They’ll already know the *Tachi* got away, because our transponder is blabbing our survival to the solar system at large.”

“No it ain’t,” Alex said.

“Explain that, Mr. Kamal.”

“This is a torpedo bomber. You think they want a nice transponder signal to lock on to when they’re makin’ runs on an enemy capital ship? Naw, there’s a handy switch up in the cockpit that says ‘transponder off.’ I flipped it before we flew out. We’re just another moving object out of a million like us.”

Holden was silent for two long breaths.

“Alex, that may be the single greatest thing anyone has ever done, in the history of the universe,” he said.

“But we can’t land, Jim,” Naomi said. “One, no port is going to let a ship with no transponder signal anywhere near them, and two, as soon as they make us out visually, the fact that we’re a Martian warship will be hard to hide.”

“Yep, that’s the downside,” Alex agreed.

“Fred Johnson,” Holden said, “gave us the network address to get in touch with him. I’m thinking that the OPA might be the one group that would let us land our stolen Martian warship somewhere.”

“It ain’t stolen,” Alex said. “It’s legitimate salvage now.”

“Yeah, you make that argument to the MCRN if they catch us, but let’s try and make sure they don’t.”

“So, we just wait here till Colonel Johnson gets back to us?” Alex asked.

“No, I wait. You two prep Lieutenant Kelly for burial. Alex, you were MCRN. You know the traditions. Do it with full honors and record it in the log. He died to get us off that ship, and we’re going to accord him every respect. As soon as we land anywhere, we’ll bounce the full record to MCRN command so they can do it officially.”

Alex nodded. “We’ll do it right, sir.”

Fred Johnson replied to his message so fast that Holden wondered if he’d been sitting at his terminal waiting for it. Johnson’s message consisted only of coordinates and the word *tightbeam.* Holden aimed the laser array at the specified location—it was the same one Fred had beamed his first message from—then turned on his mic and said, “Fred?”

The coordinates given were more than eleven light-minutes away. Holden prepared to wait twenty-two minutes for his answer. Just to have something to do, he fed the location up to the cockpit and told Alex to fly in that direction at one g as soon as they'd finished with Lieutenant Kelly.

Twenty minutes later the thrust came up and Naomi climbed the ladder. She'd stripped off her vacuum suit and was wearing a red Martian jumpsuit that was half a foot too short for her and three times too big around. Her hair and face looked clean.

"This ship has a head with a shower. Can we keep it?" she said.

"How'd it go?"

"We took care of him. There's a decent-sized cargo bay down by engineering. We put him there until we can find some way to send him home. I turned off the environment in there, so he'll stay preserved."

She held out her hand and dropped a small black cube into his lap.

"That was in a pocket under his armor," she said.

Holden held up the object. It looked like some sort of data-storage device.

"Can you find out what's on it?" he asked.

"Sure. Give me some time."

"And Amos?"

"Blood pressure's steady," Naomi said. "That's got to be a good thing."

The comm console beeped at them, and Holden started the playback.

"Jim, news of the *Donnager* has just started hitting the net. I admit I am extremely surprised to be hearing from you," said Fred's voice. "What can I do for you?"

Holden paused a moment while he mentally prepared his response. Fred's suspicion was palpable, but he'd sent Holden a keyword to use for exactly that reason.

"Fred. While our enemies have become *ubiquitous,* our list of friends has grown kind of short. In fact, you're pretty much it. I am in a stolen —"

Alex cleared his throat.

"A *salvaged* MCRN gunboat," Holden went on. "I need a way to hide that fact. I need somewhere to go where they won't just shoot me down for showing up. Help me do that."

It was half an hour before the reply came.

"I've attached a datafile on a subchannel," Fred said. "It's got your new transponder code and directions on how to install it. The code will check out in all the registries. It's legitimate. It's also got coordinates that will get you to a safe harbor. I'll meet you there. We

have a lot to talk about."

"New transponder code?" Naomi said. "How does the OPA get new transponder codes?"

"Hack the Earth-Mars Coalition's security protocols or get a mole in the registry office," Holden said. "Either way, I think we're playing in the big league now."

Chapter Sixteen: Miller

Miller watched the feed from Mars along with the rest of the station. The podium was draped in black, which was a bad sign. The single star and thirty stripes of the Martian Congressional Republic hung in the background not once, but eight times. That was worse.

"This cannot happen without careful planning," the Martian president said. "The information they sought to steal would have compromised Martian fleet security in a profound and fundamental way. They failed, but at the price of two thousand and eighty-six Martian lives. This aggression is something the Belt has been preparing for years at the least."

The Belt, Miller noticed. Not the OPA—the Belt.

"In the week since first news of that attack, we have seen thirty incursions into the security radius of Martian ships and bases, including Pallas Station. If those refineries were to be lost, the economy of Mars could suffer irreversible damage. In the face of an armed, organized guerrilla force, we have no choice but to enforce a military cordon on the stations, bases, and ships of the Belt. Congress has delivered new orders to all naval elements not presently involved in active Coalition duty, and it is our hope that our brothers and sisters of Earth will approve joint Coalition maneuvers with the greatest possible speed.

"The new mandate of the Martian navy is to secure the safety of all honest citizens, to dismantle the infrastructures of evil presently hiding in the Belt, and bring to justice those responsible for these attacks. I am pleased to say that our initial actions have resulted in the destruction of eighteen illegal warships and—"

Miller turned off the feed. That was it, then. The secret war was out of the closet. Papa Mao had been right to want Julie out, but it was too late. His darling daughter was going to have to take her chances, just like everyone else.

At the very least, it was going to mean curfews and personnel tracking all through Ceres Station. Officially, the station was neutral. The OPA didn't own it or anything else. And Star Helix was an Earth corporation, not under contractual or treaty obligation to Mars. At best, Mars and the OPA would keep their fight outside the station. At worst, there would more riots on Ceres. More death.

No, that wasn't true. At worst, Mars or the OPA would make a statement by throwing a rock or a handful of nuclear warheads at the station. Or by blowing a fusion drive on a docked ship. If things got out of hand, it would mean six or seven million dead people and the

end of everything Miller had ever known.

Odd that it should feel almost like relief.

For weeks, Miller had known. Everyone had known. But it hadn't actually happened, so every conversation, every joke, every chance interaction and semi-anonymous nod and polite moment of light banter on the tube had seemed like an evasion. He couldn't fix the cancer of war, couldn't even slow down the spread, but at least he could admit it was happening. He stretched, ate his last bite of fungal curds, drank the dregs of something not entirely unlike coffee, and headed out to keep peace in wartime.

Muss greeted him with a vague nod when he got to the station house. The board was filled with cases—crimes to be investigated, documented, and dismissed. Twice as many entries as the day before.

"Bad night," Miller said.

"Could be worse," Muss said.

"Yeah?"

"Star Helix could be a Mars corporation. As long as Earth stays neutral, we don't have to actually be the Gestapo."

"And how long you figure that'll last?"

"What time is it?" she asked. "Tell you what, though. When it does come down, I need to make a stop up toward the core. There was this one guy back when I was rape squad we could never quite nail."

"Why wait?" Miller asked. "We could go up, put a bullet in him, be back by lunch."

"Yeah, but you know how it is," she said. "Trying to stay professional. Anyway, if we did that, we'd have to investigate it, and there's no room on the board."

Miller sat at his desk. It was just shoptalk. The kind of over-the-top deadpan you did when your day was filled with underage whores and tainted drugs. And still, there was a tension in the station. It was in the way people laughed, the way they held themselves. There were more holsters visible than usual, as if by showing their weapons they might be made safe.

"You think it's the OPA?" Muss asked. Her voice was lower now.

"That killed the *Donnager,* you mean? Who else could? Plus which, they're taking credit for it."

"Some of them are. From what I heard, there's more than one OPA these days. The old-school guys don't know a goddamn thing about any of this. All shitting their pants and trying to track down the pirate casts that are claiming credit."

"So they can do what?" Miller asked. "You can shut down every loudmouth caster in the Belt, it won't change a thing."

"If there's a schism in the OPA, though… " Muss looked at the board.

If there was a schism within the OPA, the board as they saw it now was nothing. Miller had lived through two major gang wars. First when the Loca Greiga displaced and destroyed the Aryan Flyers, and then when the Golden Bough split. The OPA was bigger, and meaner, and more professional than any of them. That would be civil war in the Belt.

"Might not happen," Miller said.

Shaddid stepped out of her office, her gaze sweeping the station house. Conversations dimmed. Shaddid caught Miller's eye. She made a sharp gesture. *Get in the office.*

"Busted," Muss said.

In the office, Anderson Dawes sat at ease on one of the chairs. Miller felt his body twitch as that information fell into place. Mars and the Belt in open, armed conflict. The OPA's face on Ceres sitting with the captain of the security force.

So that's how it is, he thought.

"You're working the Mao job," Shaddid said as she took her seat. Miller hadn't been offered the option of sitting, so he clasped his hands behind him.

"You assigned it to me," he said.

"And I told you it wasn't a priority," she said.

"I disagreed," Miller said.

Dawes smiled. It was a surprisingly warm expression, especially compared to Shaddid's.

"Detective Miller," Dawes said. "You don't understand what's happening here. We are sitting on a pressure vessel, and you keep swinging a pickax at it. You need to stop that."

"You're off the Mao case," Shaddid said. "Do you understand that? I am officially removing you from that investigation as of right now. Any further investigation you do, I will have you disciplined for working outside your caseload and misappropriating Star Helix resources. You will return any material on the case to me. You will wipe any data you have in your personal partition. And you'll do it before the end of shift."

Miller's brain spun, but he kept his face impassive. She was taking Julie away. He wasn't going to let her. That was a given. But it wasn't the first issue.

"I have some inquiries in process… " he began.

"No, you don't," Shaddid said. "Your little letter to the parents was a breach of policy. Any contact with the shareholders should have come through me."

"You're telling me it didn't go out," Miller said. Meaning *You've been monitoring me.*

"It did not," Shaddid said. *Yes, I have. What are you going to do about*

it?

And there wasn't anything he could do.

"And the transcripts of the James Holden interrogation?" Miller said. "Did those get out before… "

Before the *Donnanger* was destroyed, taking with it the only living witnesses to the *Scopuli* and plunging the system into war? Miller knew the question sounded like a whine. Shaddid's jaw tensed. He wouldn't have been surprised to hear teeth cracking. Dawes broke the silence.

"I think we can make this a little easier," he said. "Detective, if I'm hearing you right, you think we're burying the issue. We aren't. But it's not in anyone's interests that Star Helix be the one to find the answers you're looking for. Think about it. You may be a Belter, but you're working for an Earth corporation. Right now, Earth is the only major power without an oar in the water. The only one who can possibly negotiate with all sides."

"And so why wouldn't they want to know the truth?" Miller said.

"That isn't the problem," Dawes said. "The problem is that Star Helix and Earth can't appear to be involved one way or the other. Their hands need to stay clean. And this issue leads outside your contract. Juliette Mao isn't on Ceres, and maybe there was a time you could have jumped a ship to wherever you found her and done the abduction. Extradition. Extraction. Whatever you want to call it. But that time has passed. Star Helix is Ceres, part of Ganymede, and a few dozen warehouse asteroids. If you leave that, you're going into enemy territory."

"But the OPA isn't," Miller said.

"We have the resources to do this right," Dawes said with a nod. "Mao is one of ours. The *Scopuli* was one of ours."

"And the *Scopuli* was the bait that killed the *Canterbury,*" Miller said. "And the *Canterbury* was the bait that killed the *Donnager*. So why exactly would anyone be better off having you be the only ones looking into something you might have done?"

"You think we nuked the *Canterbury,*" Dawes said. "The OPA, with its state-of-the-art Martian warships?"

"It got the *Donnanger* out where it could be attacked. As long as it was with the fleet, it couldn't have been boarded."

Dawes looked sour.

"Conspiracy theories, Mr. Miller," he said. "If we had cloaked Martian warships, we wouldn't be losing."

"You had enough to kill the *Donnanger* with just six ships."

"No. We didn't. Our version of blowing up the *Donnager* is a whole bunch of tramp prospectors loaded with nukes going on a suicide mission. We have many, many resources. What happened to the

Donnager wasn't part of them."

The silence was broken only by the hum of the air recycler. Miller crossed his arms.

"But… I don't understand," he said. "If the OPA didn't start this, who did?"

"That is what Juliette Mao and the crew of the *Scopuli* can tell us," Shaddid said. "Those are the stakes, Miller. Who and why and please Christ some idea of how to stop it."

"And you don't want to find them?" Miller said.

"I don't want *you* to," Dawes said. "Not when someone else can do it better."

Miller shook his head. It was going too far, and he knew it. On the other hand, sometimes going too far could tell you something too.

"I'm not sold," he said.

"You don't have to be *sold,*" Shaddid said. "This isn't a negotiation. We aren't bringing you in to ask you for a goddamn favor. I am your boss. I am telling you. Do you know those words? Telling. You."

"We have Holden," Dawes said.

"What?" Miller said at the same time Shaddid said, "You're not supposed to talk about that."

Dawes raised an arm toward Shaddid in the Belt's physical idiom of telling someone to be quiet. To Miller's surprise, she did as the OPA man said.

"We have Holden. He and his crew didn't die, and they are or are about to be in OPA custody. Do you understand what I'm saying, Detective? Do you see my point? I can do this investigation because I have the resources to do it. *You* can't even find out what happened to your own riot gear."

It was a slap. Miller looked at his shoes. He'd broken his word to Dawes about dropping the case, and the man hadn't brought it up until now. He had to give the OPA operative points for that. Added to that, if Dawes really did have James Holden, there was no chance of Miller's getting access to the interrogation.

When Shaddid spoke, her voice was surprisingly gentle.

"There were three murders yesterday. Eight warehouses got broken into, probably by the same bunch of people. We've got six people in hospital wards around the station with their nerves falling apart from a bad batch of bathtub pseudoheroin. The whole station's jumpy," she said. "There's a lot of good you can do out there, Miller. Go catch some bad guys."

"Sure, Captain," Miller said. "You bet."

Muss leaned against his desk, waiting for him. Her arms were crossed, her eyes as bored looking at him as they had been looking at the corpse of Dos Santos pinned to the corridor wall.

“New asshole?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“It’ll grow closed. Give it time. I got us one of the murders. Mid-level accountant for Naobi-Shears got his head blown off outside a bar. It looked fun.”

Miller pulled up his hand terminal and took in the basics. His heart wasn’t in it.

“Hey, Muss,” he said. “I got a question.”

“Fire away.”

“You’ve got a case you don’t want solved. What do you do?”

His new partner frowned, tilted her head, and shrugged.

“I hand it to a fish,” she said. “There was a guy back in crimes against children. If we knew the perp was one of our informants, we’d always give it to him. None of our guys ever got in trouble.”

“Yeah,” Miller said.

“For that matter, I need someone to take the shitty partner, I do the same thing,” Muss went on. “You know. Someone no one else wants to work with? Got bad breath or a shitty personality or whatever, but he needs a partner. So I pick the guy who maybe he used to be good, but then he got a divorce. Started hitting the bottle. Guy still thinks he’s a hotshot. Acts like it. Only his numbers aren’t better than anyone else’s. Give him the shit cases. The shit partner.”

Miller closed his eyes. His stomach felt uneasy.

“What did you do?” he asked.

“To get assigned to you?” Muss said. “One of the seniors made the moves on me and I shot him down.”

“So you got stuck.”

“Pretty much. Come on, Miller. You aren’t stupid,” Muss said. “You had to know.”

He’d had to know that he was the station house joke. The guy who used to be good. The one who’d lost it.

No, actually he hadn’t known that. He opened his eyes. Muss didn’t look happy or sad, pleased at his pain or particularly distressed by it. It was just work to her. The dead, the wounded, the injured. She didn’t care. Not caring was how she got through the day.

“Maybe you shouldn’t have turned him down,” Miller said.

“Ah, you’re not that bad,” Muss said. “And he had back hair. I hate back hair.”

“Glad to hear it,” Miller said. “Let’s go make some justice.”

“You’re drunk,” the asshole said.

“’M a cop,” Miller said, stabbing the air with his finger. “Don’t fuck with me.”

“I know you’re a cop. You’ve been coming to my bar for three years. It’s me. Hasini. And you’re drunk, my friend. Seriously, dangerously drunk.”

Miller looked around him. He was indeed at the Blue Frog. He didn’t remember having come here, and yet here he was. And the asshole was Hasini after all.

“I… ” Miller began, then lost his train of thought.

“Come on,” Hasini said, looping an arm around him. “It’s not that far. I’ll get you home.”

“What time is it?” Miller asked.

“Late.”

The word had a depth to it. *Late.* It was late. All the chances to make things right had somehow passed him. The system was at war, and no one was even sure why. Miller himself was turning fifty years old the next June. It was late. Late to start again. Late to realize how many years he’d spent running down the wrong road. Hasini steered him toward an electric cart the bar kept for occasions like this one. The smell of hot grease came out of the kitchen.

“Hold on,” Miller said.

“You going to puke?” Hasini asked.

Miller considered for a moment. No, it was too late to puke. He stumbled forward. Hasini laid him back in the cart and engaged the motors, and with a whine they steered out into the corridor. The lights high above them were dimmed. The cart vibrated as they passed intersection after intersection. Or maybe it didn’t. Maybe that was just his body.

“I thought I was good,” he said. “You know, all this time, I thought I was at least good.”

“You do fine,” Hasini said. “You’ve just got a shitty job.”

“That I was good at.”

“You do fine,” Hasini repeated, as if saying it would make it true.

Miller lay on the bed of the cart. The formed plastic arch of the wheel well dug into his side. It ached, but moving was too much effort. Thinking was too much effort. He’d made it through his day, Muss at his side. He’d turned in the data and materials on Julie. He had nothing worth going back to his hole for, and no place else to be.

The lights shifted into and out of his field of view. He wondered if that was what it would be like to look at stars. He’d never looked up at a sky. The thought inspired a certain vertigo. A sense of terror of the infinite that was almost pleasant.

“There anyone who can take care of you?” Hasini said when they

reached Miller's hole.

"I'll be fine. I just… I had a bad day."

"Julie," Hasini said, nodding.

"How do you know about Julie?" Miller asked.

"You've been talking about her all night," Hasini said. "She's a girl you fell for, right?"

Frowning, Miller kept a hand on the cart. Julie. He'd been talking about Julie. That was what this was about. Not his job. Not his reputation. They'd taken away Julie. The special case. The one that mattered.

"You're in love with her," Hasini said.

"Yeah, sort of," Miller said, something like revelation forcing its way through the alcohol. "I think I am."

"Too bad for you," Hasini said.

Chapter Seventeen: Holden

The *Tachi*'s galley had a full kitchen and a table with room for twelve. It also had a full-size coffeepot that could brew forty cups of coffee in less than five minutes whether the ship was in zero g or under a five-g burn. Holden said a silent prayer of thanks for bloated military budgets and pressed the brew button. He had to restrain himself from stroking the stainless steel cover while it made gentle percolating noises.

The aroma of coffee began to fill the air, competing with the baking-bread smell of whatever Alex had put in the oven. Amos was thumping around the table in his new cast, laying out plastic plates and actual honest-to-god metal silverware. In a bowl Naomi was mixing something that had the garlic scent of good hummus. Watching the crew work at these domestic tasks, Holden had a sense of peace and safety deep enough to leave him light-headed.

They'd been on the run for weeks now, pursued the entire time by one mysterious ship or another. For the first time since the *Canterbury* was destroyed, no one knew where they were. No one was demanding anything of them. As far as the solar system was concerned, they were a few casualties out of thousands on the *Donnager*. A brief vision of Shed's head disappearing like a grisly magic trick reminded him that at least one of his crew *was* a casualty. And still, it felt so good to once again be master of his own destiny that even regret couldn't entirely rob him of it.

A timer rang, and Alex pulled out a tray covered with thin, flat bread. He began cutting it into slices, onto which Naomi slathered a paste that did in fact look like hummus. Amos put them on the plates around the table. Holden drew fresh coffee into mugs that had the ship's name on the side. He passed them around. There was an awkward moment when everyone stared at the neatly set table without moving, as if afraid to destroy the perfection of the scene.

Amos solved this by saying, "I'm hungry as a fucking bear," and then sitting down with a thump. "Somebody pass me that pepper, wouldja?"

For several minutes, no one spoke; they only ate. Holden took a small bite of the flat bread and hummus, the strong flavors making him dizzy after weeks of tasteless protein bars. Then he was stuffing it into his mouth so fast it made his salivary glands flare with exquisite agony. He looked around the table, embarrassed, but everyone else was eating just as fast, so he gave up on propriety and concentrated on food. When he'd finished off the last scraps from his plate, he

leaned back with a sigh, hoping to make the contentment last as long as possible. Alex sipped coffee with his eyes closed. Amos ate the last bits of the hummus right out of the serving bowl with his spoon. Naomi gave Holden a sleepy look through half-lidded eyes that was suddenly sexy as hell. Holden quashed that thought and raised his mug.

"To Kelly's marines. Heroes to the last, may they rest in peace," he said.

"To the marines," everyone at the table echoed, then clinked mugs and drank.

Alex raised his mug and said, "To Shed."

"Yeah, to Shed, and to the assholes who killed him roasting in hell," Amos said in a quiet voice. "Right beside the fucker who killed the *Cant.*"

The mood at the table got somber. Holden felt the peaceful moment slipping away as quietly as it had come.

"So," he said. "Tell me about our new ship. Alex?"

"She's a beaut, Cap. I ran her at twelve g for most of half an hour when we left the *Donnie,* and she purred like a kitten the whole time. The pilot's chair is comfy too."

Holden nodded.

"Amos? Get a chance to look at her engine room yet?" he asked.

"Yep. Clean as a whistle. This is going to be a boring gig for a grease monkey like me," the mechanic replied.

"Boring would be nice," Holden said. "Naomi? What do you think?"

She smiled. "I love it. It's got the nicest showers I've ever seen on a ship this size. Plus, there's a truly amazing medical bay with a computerized expert system that knows how to fix broken marines. We should have found it rather than fix Amos on our own."

Amos thumped his cast with one knuckle.

"You guys did a good job, Boss."

Holden looked around at his clean crew and ran a hand through his own hair, not pulling it away covered in grease for the first time in weeks.

"Yeah, a shower and not having to fix broken legs sounds good. Anything else?"

Naomi tilted her head back, her eyes moving as though she was running through a mental checklist.

"We've got a full tank of water, the injectors have enough fuel pellets to run the reactor for about thirty years, and the galley is fully stocked. You'll have to tie me up if you plan to give her back to the navy. I love her."

"She is a cunning little boat," Holden said with a smile. "Have a chance to look at the weapons?"

"Two tubes and twenty long-range torpedoes with high-yield plasma warheads," Naomi said. "Or at least that's what the manifest says. They load those from the outside, so I can't physically verify without climbing around on the hull."

"The weapons panel is sayin' the same thing, Cap," Alex said. "And full loads in all the point defense cannons. You know, except… "

Except the burst you fired into the men who killed Gomez.

"Oh, and, Captain, when we put Kelly in the cargo hold, I found a big crate with the letters map on the side. According to the manifest, it stands for 'Mobile Assault Package.' Apparently navy-speak for a big box of guns," Naomi said.

"Yeah," Alex said. "It's full kit for eight marines."

"Okay," Holden said. "So with the fleet-quality Epstein, we've got legs. And if you guys are right about the weapons load out, we've also got teeth. The next question is what do we do with it? I'm inclined to take Colonel Johnson's offer of refuge. Any thoughts?"

"I'm all for that, Captain," Amos said. "I always did think the Belters were getting the short end of the stick. I'll go be a revolutionary for a while, I guess."

"Earthman's burden, Amos?" Naomi asked with a grin.

"What the fuck does that even mean?"

"Nothing, just teasing," she said. "I know you like our side because you just want to steal our women."

Amos grinned back, suddenly in on the joke.

"Well, you ladies do have the legs that go *all* the way up," he said.

"Okay, enough," Holden said, raising his hand. "So, two votes for Fred. Anyone else?"

Naomi raised her hand.

"I vote for Fred," she said.

"Alex? What do you think?" Holden asked.

The Martian pilot leaned back in his chair and scratched his head.

"I got nowhere in particular to be, so I'll stick with you guys, I guess," he said. "But I hope this don't turn into another round of bein' told what to do."

"It won't," Holden replied. "I have a ship with guns on it now, and the next time someone orders me to do something, I'm using them."

After dinner, Holden took a long, slow tour of his new ship. He opened every door, looked in every closet, turned on every panel, and

read every readout. He stood in engineering next to the fusion reactor and closed his eyes, getting used to the almost subliminal vibration she made. If something ever went wrong with it, he wanted to feel it in his bones before any warning ever sounded. He stopped and touched all the tools in the well-stocked machine shop, and he climbed up to the personnel deck and wandered through the crew cabins until he found one he liked, and messed up the bed to show it was taken. He found a bunch of jumpsuits in what looked like his size, then moved them to the closet in his new room. He took a second shower and let the hot water massage knots in his back that were three weeks old. As he wandered back to his cabin, he trailed his fingers along the wall, feeling the soft give of the fire-retardant foam and anti-spalling webbing over the top of the armored steel bulkheads. When he arrived at his cabin, Alex and Amos were both getting settled into theirs.

"Which cabin did Naomi take?" he asked.

Amos shrugged. "She's still up in ops, fiddling with something."

Holden decided to put off sleep for a while and rode the keel ladder-lift—*we have a lift!*—up to the operations deck. Naomi was sitting on the floor, an open bulkhead panel in front of her and what looked like a hundred small parts and wires laid out around her in precise patterns. She was staring at something inside the open compartment.

"Hey, Naomi, you should really get some sleep. What are you working on?"

She gestured vaguely at the compartment.

"Transponder," she said.

Holden moved over and sat down on the floor next to her.

"Tell me how to help."

She handed him her hand terminal; Fred's instructions for changing the transponder signal were open on the screen.

"It's ready to go. I've got the console hooked up to the transponder's data port just like he says. I've got the computer program set up to run the override he describes. The new transponder code and ship registry data are ready to be entered. I put in the new name. Did Fred pick it?"

"No, that was me."

"Oh. All right, then. But… " Her voice trailed off, and she waved at the transponder again.

"What's the problem?" Holden asked.

"Jim, they make these things *not* to be fiddled with. The civilian version of this device fuses itself into a solid lump of silicon if it thinks it's being tampered with. Who knows what the military version of the fail-safe is? Drop the magnetic bottle in the reactor? Turn us into a supernova?"

Naomi turned to look at him.

“I’ve got it all set up and ready to go, but now I don’t think we should throw the switch,” she said. “We don’t know the consequences of failure.”

Holden got up off the floor and moved over to the computer console. A program Naomi had named Trans01 was waiting to be run. He hesitated for one second, then pressed the button to execute. The ship failed to vaporize.

“I guess Fred wants us alive, then,” he said.

Naomi slumped down with a noisy, extended exhale.

“See, this is why I can’t ever be in command,” she said.

“Don’t like making tough calls with incomplete information?”

“More I’m not suicidally irresponsible,” she replied, and began slowly reassembling the transponder housing.

Holden punched the comm system on the wall. “Well, crew, welcome aboard the gas freighter *Rocinante.*”

“What does that name even mean?” Naomi said after he let go of the comm button.

“It means we need to go find some windmills,” Holden said over his shoulder as he headed to the lift.

Tycho Manufacturing and Engineering Concern was one of the first major corporations to move into the Belt. In the early days of expansion, Tycho engineers and a fleet of ships had captured a small comet and parked it in stable orbit as a water resupply point decades before ships like the *Canterbury* began bringing ice in from the nearly limitless fields in Saturn’s rings. It had been the most complex, difficult feat of mass-scale engineering humanity had ever accomplished until the next thing they did.

As an encore, Tycho had built the massive reaction drives into the rock of Ceres and Eros and spent more than a decade teaching the asteroids to spin. They had been slated to create a network of high-atmosphere floating cities above Venus before the development rights fell into a labyrinth of lawsuits now entering its eighth decade. There was some discussion of space elevators for Mars and Earth, but nothing solid had come of it yet. If you had an impossible engineering job that needed to be done in the Belt, and you could afford it, you hired Tycho.

Tycho Station, the Belt headquarters of the company, was a massive ring station built around a sphere half a kilometer across, with more

than sixty-five million cubic meters of manufacturing and storage space inside. The two counter-rotating habitation rings that circled the sphere had enough space for fifteen thousand workers and their families. The top of the manufacturing sphere was festooned with half a dozen massive construction waldoes that looked like they could rip a heavy freighter in half. The bottom of the sphere had a bulbous projection fifty meters across, which housed a capital-ship-class fusion reactor and drive system, making Tycho Station the largest mobile construction platform in the solar system. Each compartment within the massive rings was built on a swivel system that allowed the chambers to reorient to thrust gravity when the rings stopped spinning and the station flew to its next work location.

Holden knew all this, and his first sight of the station still took his breath away. It wasn't just the size of it. It was the idea that four generations of the smartest people in the solar system had been living and working here as they helped drag humanity into the outer planets almost through sheer force of will.

Amos said, "It looks like a big bug."

Holden started to protest, but it did resemble some kind of giant spider: fat bulbous body and all its legs sprouting from the top of its head.

Alex said, "Forget the station, look at *that* monster."

The vessel it was constructing dwarfed the station. Ladar returns told Holden the ship was just over two kilometers long and half a kilometer wide. Round and stubby, it looked like a cigarette butt made of steel. Framework girders exposed internal compartments and machinery at various stages of construction, but the engines looked complete, and the hull had been assembled over the bow. The name *Nauvoo* was painted in massive white letters across it.

"So the Mormons are going to ride that thing all the way to Tau Ceti, huh?" Amos asked, following it up with a long whistle. "Ballsy bastards. No guarantee there's even a planet worth a damn on the other end of that hundred-year trip."

"They seem pretty sure," Holden replied. "And you don't make the money to build a ship like that by being stupid. I, for one, wish them nothing but luck."

"They'll get the stars," Naomi said. "How can you not envy them that?"

"Their great-grandkids'll get maybe *a* star if they don't all starve to death orbiting a rock they can't use," Amos said. "Let's not get grandiose here."

He pointed at the impressively large comm array jutting from the *Nauvoo*'s flank.

"Want to bet that's what threw our anus-sized tightbeam message?"

Amos said.

Alex nodded. “If you want to send private messages home from a couple light-years away, you need serious beam coherence. They probably had the volume turned down to avoid cuttin’ a hole in us.”

Holden got up from the copilot’s couch and pushed past Amos.

“Alex, see if they’ll let us land.”

Landing was surprisingly easy. The station control directed them to a docking port on the side of the sphere and stayed on the line, guiding them in, until Alex had married the docking tube to the airlock door. The tower control never pointed out that they had a lot of armaments for a transport and no tanks for carrying compressed gas. She got them docked, then wished them a pleasant day.

Holden put on his atmosphere suit and made a quick trip to the cargo bay, then met the others just inside the *Rocinante*’s inner airlock door with a large duffel.

“Put your suits on, that’s now standard ops for this crew anytime we go someplace new. And take one of these,” he said, pulling handguns and cartridge magazines from the bag. “Hide it in a pocket or your bag if you like, but I will be wearing mine openly.”

Naomi frowned at him.

“Seems a bit… confrontational, doesn’t it?”

“I’m tired of being kicked around,” Holden said. “The *Roci*’s a good start toward independence, and I’m taking a little piece of her with me. Call it a good luck charm.”

“Fuckin’ A,” said Amos, and strapped one of the guns to his thigh.

Alex stuffed his into the pocket of his flight suit. Naomi wrinkled her nose and waved off the last gun. Holden put it back into his duffel, led the crew into the *Rocinante*’s airlock, and cycled it. An older, dark-skinned man with a heavy build waited for them on the other side. As they came in, he smiled.

“Welcome to Tycho Station,” said the Butcher of Anderson Station. “Call me Fred.”

Chapter Eighteen: Miller

The death of the *Donnager* hit Ceres like a hammer striking a gong. Newsfeeds clogged themselves with high-power telescopic footage of the battle, most if not all of it faked. The Belt chatter swam with speculation about a secret OPA fleet. The six ships that had taken down the Martian flagship were hailed as heroes and martyrs. Slogans like *We did it once and we can do it again* and *Drop some rocks* cropped up even in apparently innocuous settings.

The *Canterbury* had stripped away the complacency of the Belt, but the *Donnager* had done something worse. It had taken away the fear. The Belters had gotten a sudden, decisive, and unexpected win. Anything seemed possible, and the hope seduced them.

It would have scared Miller more if he'd been sober.

Miller's alarm had been going off for the past ten minutes. The grating buzz took on subtones and overtones when he listened to it long enough. A constant rising tone, fluttering percussion throbbing under it, even soft music hiding underneath the blare. Illusions. Aural hallucinations. The voice of the whirlwind.

The previous night's bottle of fungal faux bourbon sat on the bedside table where a carafe of water usually waited. It still had a couple fingers at the bottom. Miller considered the soft brown of the liquid, thought about how it would feel on his tongue.

The beautiful thing about losing your illusions, he thought, was that you got to stop pretending. All the years he'd told himself that he was respected, that he was good at his job, that all his sacrifices had been made for a reason fell away and left him with the clear, unmuddied knowledge that he was a functional alcoholic who had pared away everything good in his own life to make room for anesthetic. Shaddid thought he was a joke. Muss thought he was the price she paid not to sleep with someone she didn't like. The only one who might have any respect for him at all was Havelock, an Earther. It was peaceful, in its way. He could stop making the effort to keep up appearances. If he stayed in bed listening to the alarm drone, he was just living up to expectations. No shame in that.

And still there was work to be done. He reached over and turned off the alarm. Just before it cut off, he heard a voice in it, soft but insistent. A woman's voice. He didn't know what she'd been saying. But since she was just in his head, she'd get another chance later.

He levered himself out of bed, sucked down some painkillers and rehydration goo, stalked to the shower, and burned a day and a half's ration of hot water just standing there, watching his legs get pink. He

dressed in his last set of clean clothes. Breakfast was a bar of pressed yeast and grape sweetener. He dropped the bourbon from the bedside table into the recycler without finishing it, just to prove to himself that he still could.

Muss was waiting at the desk. She looked up when he sat.

"Still waiting for the labs on the rape up on eighteen," she said. "They promised them by lunch."

"We'll see," Miller said.

"I've got a possible witness. Girl who was with the vic earlier in the evening. Her deposition said she left before anything happened, but the security cameras aren't backing her up."

"Want me in the questioning?" Miller asked.

"Not yet. But if I need some theater, I'll pull you in."

"Fair enough."

Miller didn't watch her walk away. After a long moment staring at nothing, he pulled up his disk partition, reviewed what still needed doing, and started cleaning the place up.

As he worked, his mind replayed for the millionth time the slow, humiliating interview with Shaddid and Dawes. *We have Holden,* Dawes said. *You can't even find what happened to your own riot gear.* Miller poked at the words like a tongue at the gap of a missing tooth. It rang true. Again.

Still, it might have been bullshit. It might have been a story concocted just to make him feel small. There wasn't any proof, after all, that Holden and his crew had survived. What proof could there be? The *Donnanger* was gone, and all its logs along with it. There would have to have been a ship that made it out. Either a rescue vessel or one of the Martian escort ships. There was no way a ship could have gotten out and not been the singular darling of every newsfeed and pirate cast since. You couldn't keep something like that quiet.

Or sure you could. It just wouldn't be easy. He squinted at the empty air of the station house. Now. How *would* you cover up a surviving ship?

Miller pulled up a cheap navigation plotter he'd bought five years before—transit times had figured in a smuggling case—and plotted the date and position of the *Donnager*'s demise. Anything running under non-Epstein thrust would still have been out there, and Martian warships would have either picked it up or blasted it into background radiation by now. So if Dawes wasn't just handing him bullshit, that meant an Epstein drive. He ran a couple quick calculations. With a good drive, someone could have made Ceres in just less than a month. Call it three weeks to be safe.

He looked at the data for almost ten minutes, but the next step

didn't come to him, so he stepped away, got some coffee, and pulled up the interview he and Muss had done with a Belter ground-crew grunt. The man's face was long and cadaverous and subtly cruel. The recorder hadn't had a good fix on him, so the picture kept bouncing around. Muss asked the man what he'd seen, and Miller leaned forward to read the transcribed answers, checking for incorrectly recognized words. Thirty seconds later, the grunt said *clip whore* and the transcript read *clipper*. Miller corrected it, but the back of his mind kept churning.

Probably eight or nine hundred ships came into Ceres in a given day. Call it a thousand to be safe. Give it a couple days on either side of the three-week mark, that was only four thousand entries. Pain in the ass, sure, but not impossible. Ganymede would be the other real bitch. With its agriculture, there would be hundreds of transports a day there. Still, it wouldn't double the workload. Eros. Tycho. Pallas. How many ships docked on Pallas every day?

He'd missed almost two minutes of the recording. He started again, forcing himself to pay attention this time, and half an hour later, he gave up.

The ten busiest ports with two days to either side of an estimated arrival of an Epstein-drive ship that originated when and where the *Donnager* died totaled twenty-eight thousand docking records, more or less. But he could cut that down to seventeen thousand if he excluded stations and ports explicitly run by Martian military and research stations with all or nearly all inner planets inhabitants. So how long would it take him to check all the porting records by hand, pretending for a minute that he was stupid enough to do it? Call it 118 days—if he didn't eat or sleep. Just working ten-hour days, doing nothing else, he could almost get through it in less than a year. A little less.

Except no. Because there were ways to narrow it. He was only looking for Epstein drive ships. Most of the traffic at any of the ports would be local. Torch drive ships flown by prospectors and short-hop couriers. The economics of spaceflight made relatively few and relatively large ships the right answer for long flights. So take it down by, conservatively, three-quarters, and he was back in the close-to-four-thousand range again. Still hundreds of hours of work, but if he could think of some other filter that would just feed him the likely suspects… For instance, if the ship couldn't have filed a flight plan before the *Donnager* got killed.

The request interface for the port logs was ancient, uncomfortable, and subtly different from Eros to Ganymede to Pallas and on and on. Miller tacked the information requests on to seven different cases, including a month-old cold case on which he was only a consultant. Port logs were public and open, so he didn't particularly need his

detective status to hide his actions. With any luck Shaddid's monitoring of him wouldn't extend to low-level, public-record poking around. And even if it did, he might get the replies before she caught on.

Never knew if you had any luck left unless you pushed it. Besides, there wasn't a lot to lose.

When the connection from the lab opened on his terminal, he almost jumped. The technician was a gray-haired woman with an unnaturally young face.

"Miller? Muss with you?"

"Nope," Miller said. "She's got an interrogation."

He was pretty sure that was what she'd said. The tech shrugged.

"Well, her system's not answering. I wanted to tell you we got a match off the rape you sent us. It wasn't the boyfriend. Her boss did it."

Miller nodded. "You put in for the warrant?" he asked.

"Yep," she said. "It's already in the file."

Miller pulled it up: STAR HELIX ON BEHALF OF CERES STATION AUTHORIZES AND MANDATES THE DETENTION OF IMMANUEL CORVUS DOWD PENDING ADJUDICATION OF SECURITY INCIDENT CCS-4949231. The judge's digital signature was listed in green. He felt a slow smile on his lips.

"Thanks," he said.

On the way out of the station, one of the vice squads asked him where he was headed. He said lunch.

The Arranha Accountancy Group had their offices in the nice part of the governmental quarter in sector seven. It wasn't Miller's usual stomping grounds, but the warrant was good on the whole station. Miller went to the secretary at the front desk—a good-looking Belter with a starburst pattern embroidered on his vest—and explained that he needed to speak with Immanuel Corvus Dowd. The secretary's deep-brown skin took on an ashy tone. Miller stood back, not blocking the exit, but keeping close.

Twenty minutes later, an older man in a good suit came through the front door, stopped in front of Miller, and looked him up and down.

"Detective Miller?" the man said.

"You'd be Dowd's lawyer," Miller said cheerfully.

"I am, and I would like to—"

"Really," Miller said. "We should do this now."

The office was clean and spare with light blue walls that lit themselves from within. Dowd sat at the table. He was young enough that he still looked arrogant, but old enough to be scared. Miller nodded to him.

"You're Immanuel Corvus Dowd?" he said.

"Before you continue, Detective," the lawyer said, "my client is

involved with very high-level negotiations. His client base includes some of the most important people in the war effort. Before you make any accusations, you should be aware that I can and will have everything you've done reviewed, and if there is one mistake, you will be held responsible."

"Mr. Dowd," Miller said. "What I am about to do to you is literally the only bright spot in my day. If you could see your way clear to resisting arrest, I'd really appreciate it."

"Harry?" Dowd said, looking to his lawyer. His voice cracked a little.

The lawyer shook his head.

Back at the police cart, Miller took a long moment. Dowd, handcuffed in the back, where everyone walking by could see him, was silent. Miller pulled up his hand terminal, noted the time of arrest, the objections of the lawyer, and a few other minor comments. A young woman in professional dress of cream-colored linen hesitated at the door of the accountancy. Miller didn't recognize her; she was no one involved with the rape case, or at least not the one he was working. Her face had the expressionless calm of a fighter. He turned, craning his neck to look at Dowd, humiliated and not looking back. The woman shifted her gaze to Miller. She nodded once. *Thank you.*

He nodded back. *Just doing my job.*

She went through the door.

Two hours later, Miller finished the last of the paperwork and sent Dowd off to the cells.

Three and a half hours later, the first of his docking log requests came in.

Five hours later, the government of Ceres collapsed.

Despite being full, the station house was silent. Detectives and junior investigators, patrolmen and desk workers, the high and the low, they all gathered before Shaddid. She stood at her podium, her hair pulled back tight. She wore her Star Helix uniform, but the insignia had been removed. Her voice was shaky.

"You've all heard this by now, but starting now, it's official. The United Nations, responding to requests from Mars, is withdrawing from its oversight and… protection of Ceres Station. This is a peaceful transition. This is not a coup. I'm going to say that again. This isn't a coup. Earth is pulling out of here, we aren't pushing."

“That’s bullshit, sir,” someone shouted. Shaddid raised her hand.

“There’s a lot of loose talk,” Shaddid said. “I don’t want to hear any of it from you. The governor’s going to make the formal announcement at the start of the next shift, and we’ll get more details then. Until we hear otherwise, the Star Helix contract is still in place. A provisional government is being formed with members drawn from local business and union representation. We are still the law on Ceres, and I expect you to behave appropriately. You will all be here for your shifts. You will be here on time. You will act professionally and within the scope of standard practice.”

Miller looked over at Muss. His partner’s hair was still unkempt from the pillow. It was pushing midnight for them both.

“Any questions?” Shaddid said in a voice that implied there ought not be.

Who’s going to pay Star Helix? Miller thought. *What laws are we enforcing? What does Earth know that makes walking away from the biggest port in the Belt the smart move?*

Who’s going to negotiate your peace treaty now?

Muss, seeing Miller’s gaze, smiled.

“Guess we’re hosed,” Miller said.

“Had to happen,” Muss agreed. “I better go. Got a stop to make.”

“Up at the core?”

Muss didn’t answer, because she didn’t have to. Ceres didn’t have laws. It had police. Miller headed back to his hole. The station hummed, the stone beneath him vibrating from the countless docking clamps and reactor cores, tubes and recyclers and pneumatics. The stone was alive, and he’d forgotten the small signs that proved it. Six million people lived here, breathed this air. Fewer than in a middle-sized city on Earth. He wondered if they were expendable.

Had it really gone so far that the inner planets would be willing to lose a major station? It seemed like it had if Earth was abandoning Ceres. The OPA would step in, whether it wanted to or not. The power vacuum was too great. Then Mars would call it an OPA coup. Then… Then what? Board it and put it under martial law? That was the good answer. Nuke it into dust? He couldn’t quite bring himself to believe that either. There was just too much money involved. Docking fees alone would fuel a small national economy. And Shaddid and Dawes —much as he hated it—were right. Ceres under Earth contract had been the best hope for a negotiated peace.

Was there someone on Earth who didn’t *want* that peace? Someone or something powerful enough to move the glacial bureaucracy of the United Nations to take action?

“What am I looking at, Julie?” he said to the empty air. “What did you see out there that’s worth Mars and the Belt killing each other?”

The station hummed to itself, a quiet, constant sound too soft for him to hear the voices within it.

Muss didn't come to work in the morning, but there was a message on his system telling him she'd be in late. "Cleanup" was her only explanation.

To look at it, nothing about the station house had changed. The same people coming to the same place to do the same thing. No, that wasn't true. The energy was high. People were smiling, laughing, clowning around. It was a manic high, panic pressed through a cheesecloth mask of normalcy. It wasn't going to last.

They were all that separated Ceres from anarchy. They were the law, and the difference between the survival of six million people and some mad bastard forcing open all the airlocks or poisoning the recyclers rested on maybe thirty thousand people. People like him. Maybe he should have rallied, risen to the occasion like the rest of them. The truth was the thought made him tired.

Shaddid marched by and tapped him on the shoulder. He sighed, rose from his chair, and followed her. Dawes was in her office again, looking shaken and sleep deprived. Miller nodded to him. Shaddid crossed her arms, her eyes softer and less accusing than he'd become used to.

"This is going to be tough," she said. "We're facing something harder than anything we've had to do before. I need a team I can trust with my life. Extraordinary circumstances. You understand that?"

"Yeah," he said. "I got it. I'll stop drinking, get myself together."

"Miller. You're not a bad person at heart. There was a time you were a pretty good cop. But I don't trust you, and we don't have time to start over," Shaddid said, her voice as near to gentle as he had ever heard it. "You're fired."

Chapter Nineteen: Holden

Fred stood alone, hand outstretched, a warm and open smile on his broad face. There were no guards with assault rifles behind him. Holden shook Fred's hand and then started laughing. Fred smiled and looked confused but let Holden keep a grip on his hand, waiting for Holden to explain what was so funny.

"I'm sorry, but you have no idea how pleasant this is," Holden said. "This is *literally* the first time in over a month that I've gotten off a ship without it blowing up behind me."

Fred laughed with him now, an honest laugh that seemed to originate somewhere in his belly.

After a moment the man said, "You're quite safe here. We are the most protected station in the outer planets."

"Because you're OPA?" Holden asked.

Fred shook his head.

"No. We make campaign contributions to Earth and Mars politicians in amounts that would make a Hilton blush," he said. "If anyone blows us up, half the UN assembly and all of the Martian Congress will be howling for blood. It's the problem with politics. Your enemies are often your allies. And vice versa."

Fred gestured to a doorway behind him and motioned for everyone to follow. The ride was short, but halfway through, gravity reappeared, shifting in a disorienting swoop. Holden stumbled. Fred looked chagrined.

"I'm sorry. I should have warned you about that. The central hub's null g. Moving into the ring's rotational gravity can be awkward the first time."

"I'm fine," Holden said. Naomi's brief smile might only have been his imagination.

A moment later the elevator door opened onto a wide carpeted corridor with walls of pale green. It had the reassuring smell of air scrubbers and fresh carpet glue. Holden wouldn't have been surprised to find they were piping 'new space station' scent into the air. The doors that led off the corridor were made of faux wood distinguishable from the real thing only because nobody had that much money. Of all his crew, Holden was almost certainly the only one who had grown up in a house with real wooden furniture and fixtures. Amos had grown up in Baltimore. They hadn't seen a tree there in more than a century.

Holden pulled off his helmet and turned around to tell his crew to do the same, but theirs were already off. Amos looked up and down the corridor and whistled.

“Nice digs, Fred,” he said.

“Follow me, I’ll get you settled in,” Fred replied, leading them down the corridor. As he walked, he spoke. “Tycho Station has undergone a number of refurbishments over the last hundred years, as you might guess, but the basics haven’t changed much. It was a brilliant design to begin with; Malthus Tycho was an engineering genius. His grandson, Bredon, runs the company now. He isn’t on station at the moment. Down the well at Luna negotiating the next big deal.”

Holden said, “Seems like you have a lot on your plate already, with that monster parked outside. And, you know, a war going on.”

A group of people in jumpsuits of various colors walked past, talking animatedly. The corridor was so wide that no one had to give way. Fred gestured at them as they went by.

“First shift’s just ending, so this is rush hour,” he said. “It’s actually time to start drumming up new work. The *Nauvoo* is almost done. They’ll be loading colonists on her in six months. Always have to have the next project lined up. The Tycho spends eleven million UN dollars every day she’s in operation, whether we make money that day or not. It’s a big nut to cover. And the war… well, we’re hoping that’s temporary.”

“And now you’re taking in refugees. That won’t help,” Holden said.

Fred just laughed and said, “Four more people won’t put us in the poorhouse anytime soon.”

Holden stopped, forcing the others to pull up short behind him. It was several steps before Fred noticed, then turned around with a confused look.

“You’re dodging,” Holden said. “Other than a couple billion dollars’ worth of stolen Martian warship, we haven’t got anything of value. Everyone thinks we’re dead. Any access of our accounts ruins that, and I just don’t live in a universe where Daddy Warbucks swoops in and makes everything okay out of the goodness of his heart. So either tell us why you’re taking the risk of putting us up, or we go get back on our ship and try our hand at piracy.”

“Scourge of the Martian merchant fleet, they’ll call us,” Amos growled from somewhere behind him. He sounded pleased.

Fred held up his hands. There was a hardness in his eyes, but also an amused respect.

“Nothing underhanded, you have my word,” he said. “You’re armed, and station security will allow you to carry guns whenever you like. That alone should reassure you that I’m not planning foul play. But let me get you settled in before we do much more talking, okay?”

Holden didn’t move. Another group of returning workers was going by in the corridor, and they watched the scene curiously as they passed. Someone from the knot of people called out, “Everything

okay, Fred?"

Fred nodded and waved them by impatiently. "Let's get out of the corridor at least."

"We aren't unpacking until we get some answers," Holden replied.

"Fine. We're almost there," Fred said, and then led them off again at a somewhat faster pace. He stopped at a small inset in the corridor wall with two doors in it. Opening one with the swipe of a card, he led the four of them into a large residential suite with a roomy living space and lots of seating.

"Bathroom is that door back there on the left. The bedroom is the one on the right. There's even a small kitchen space over here," Fred said, pointing to each thing as he spoke.

Holden sat down in a large brown faux-leather recliner and leaned it back. A remote control was in a pocket of the armrest. He assumed it controlled the impressively large screen that took up most of one wall. Naomi and Amos sat on a couch that matched his chair, and Alex draped himself over a loveseat in a nice contrasting cream color.

"Comfortable?" Fred asked, pulling a chair away from the six-seat dining area and sitting down across from Holden.

"It's all right," Holden said defensively. "My ship has a really nice coffeemaker."

"I suppose bribes won't work. You are all comfortable, though? We have two suites set aside for you, both this basic layout, though the other suite has two rooms. I wasn't sure of the, ah, sleeping arrangements… " Fred trailed off uncomfortably.

"Don't worry, Boss, you can bunk with me," Amos said with a wink at Naomi.

Naomi just smiled faintly.

"Okay, Fred, we're off the street," she said. "Now answer the captain's questions."

Fred nodded, then stood up and cleared his throat. He seemed to review something. When he spoke, the conversational facade was gone. His voice carried a grim authority.

"War between the Belt and Mars is suicide. Even if every rock hopper in the Belt were armed, we still couldn't compete with the Martian navy. We might kill a few with tricks and suicide runs. Mars might feel forced to nuke one of our stations to prove a point. But we can strap chemical rockets onto a couple hundred rocks the size of bunk beds and rain Armageddon down on Martian dome cities."

Fred paused, as if looking for words, then sat back down on his chair.

"All of the war drums ignore that. It's the elephant in the room. Anyone who doesn't live on a spaceship is structurally vulnerable. Tycho, Eros, Pallas, Ceres. Stations can't evade incoming missiles. And

with all of the enemy's citizens living at the bottom of huge gravity wells, we don't even have to aim particularly well. Einstein was right. We will be fighting the next war with rocks. But the Belt has rocks that will turn the surface of Mars into a molten sea.

"Right now everyone is still playing nice, and only shooting at ships. Very gentlemanly. But sooner or later, one side or the other will be pressed to do something desperate."

Holden leaned forward, the slick surface of his environment suit making an embarrassing squeak on the leather textured chair. No one laughed.

"I agree. What does that have to do with us?" he asked.

"Too much blood has already been shed," Fred said.

Shed.

Holden winced at the bleak, unintentional pun but said nothing.

"The *Canterbury,*" Fred continued. "The *Donnager*. People aren't just going to forget about those ships, and those thousands of innocent people."

"Seems like you just crossed off the only two options, Chief," Alex said. "No war, no peace."

"There's a third alternative. Civilized society has another way of dealing with things like this," Fred said. "A criminal trial."

Amos' snort shook the air. Holden had to fight not to smile himself.

"Are you fucking serious?" Amos asked. "And how do you put a goddamn Martian stealth ship on trial? Do we go question all the stealth ships about their whereabouts, double-check their alibis?"

Fred held up a hand.

"Stop thinking of the *Canterbury*'s destruction as an act of war," he said. "It was a crime. Right now, people are overreacting, but once the situation sinks in, heads will cool. People on both sides will see where this road goes and look for another way out. There is a window where the saner elements can investigate events, negotiate jurisdiction, and assign blame to some party or parties that both sides can agree to. A trial. It's the only outcome that doesn't involve millions of deaths and the collapse of human infrastucture."

Holden shrugged, a gesture barely visible in his heavy environment suit.

"So it goes to a trial. You still aren't answering my question."

Fred pointed at Holden, then at each of the crew in turn.

"You're the ace in the hole. You four people are the only eyewitnesses to the destruction of *both* ships. When the trial comes, I need you and your depositions. I have influence already through our political contacts, but you can buy me a seat at the table. It will be a whole new set of treaties between the Belt and the inner planets. We can do in months what I'd dreamed of doing in decades."

"And you want to use our value as witnesses to force your way into the process so you can make those treaties look the way you want them to," Holden said.

"Yes. And I'm willing to give you protection, shelter, and run of my station for as long as it takes to get there."

Holden took a long, deep breath, got up, and started unzipping his suit.

"Yeah, okay. That's just self-serving enough I believe it," he said. "Let's get settled in."

Naomi was singing karaoke. Just thinking about it made Holden's head spin. Naomi. Karaoke. Even considering everything that had happened to them over the past month, Naomi up onstage with a mic in one hand and some sort of fuchsia martini in the other, screaming out an angry Belt-punk anthem by the Moldy Filters, was the strangest thing he'd ever seen. She finished to scattered applause and a few catcalls, then staggered off the stage and collapsed across from him in the booth.

She held up her drink, sloshing a good half of it onto the table, then threw the other half back all at once.

"Whadja think?" Naomi asked, waving at the bartender for another.

"It was terrible," Holden replied.

"No, really."

"It was truly one of the most awful renditions of one of the most awful songs I've ever heard."

Naomi shook her head, blowing an exasperated raspberry at him. Her dark hair fell across her face and, when the bartender brought her a second brightly colored martini, foiled all her attempts at drinking. She finally grabbed her hair and held it above her head in a clump while she drank.

"You don't get it," she said. "It's *supposed* to be awful. That's the point."

"Then it was the best version of that song I've ever heard," Holden said.

"Damn straight." Naomi looked around the bar. "Where're Amos and Alex?"

"Amos found what I'm pretty sure was the most expensive hooker I've ever seen. Alex is in the back playing darts. He made some claims about the superiority of Martian darts players. I assume they're going

to kill him and throw him out an airlock."

A second singer was onstage, crooning out some sort of Vietnamese power ballad. Naomi watched the singer for a while, sipping her drink, then said, "Maybe we should go save him."

"Which one?"

"Alex. Why would Amos need saving?"

"Because I'm pretty sure he told the expensive hooker he was on Fred's expense account."

"Let's mount a rescue mission; we can save them both," Naomi said, then drank the rest of her cocktail. "I need more rescue fuel, though."

She started waving at the bartender again, but Holden reached out and grabbed her hand and held it on the table.

"Maybe we should take a breather instead," he said.

A flush of anger as intense as it was brief lit her face. She pulled back her hand.

"You take a breather. I've just had two ships and a bunch of friends shot out from underneath me, and spent three weeks of dead time flying to get here. So, no. I'm getting another drink, and then doing another set. The crowd loves me," Naomi said.

"What about our rescue mission?"

"Lost cause. Amos will be murdered by space hookers, but at least he'll die the way he lived."

Naomi pushed her way up from the table, grabbed her martini off the bar, and headed toward the karaoke stage. Holden watched her go, then finished off the scotch he'd been nursing for the past two hours and got up.

For a moment there, he'd had a vision of the two of them staggering back to the room together, then falling into bed. He'd have hated himself in the morning for taking advantage, but he'd still have done it. Naomi was looking at him from the stage, and he realized he'd been staring. He gave a little wave, then headed out the door with only ghosts—Ade, Captain McDowell, Gomez and Kelly and Shed—to keep him company.

The suite was comfortable and huge and depressing. He'd lain on the bed less than five minutes before he was up and out the door again. He walked the corridor for half an hour, finding the big intersections that led to other parts of the ring. He found an electronics store and a teahouse and what on closer inspection turned out to be a very

expensive brothel. He declined the video menu of services the desk clerk offered and wandered out again, wondering if Amos was somewhere inside.

He was halfway down a corridor he hadn't seen before when a small knot of teenage girls passed him. Their faces looked no older than fourteen, but they were already as tall as he was. They got quiet as he walked by, then burst out laughing when he was behind them, and hurried away. Tycho was a city, and he suddenly felt very much like a foreigner, unsure of where to go or what to do.

It was no surprise to him when he looked up from his wanderings and discovered he'd come to the elevator to the docking area. He punched the button and climbed inside, remembering to turn on his boot mags just in time to avoid being flung off his feet when the gravity twisted sideways and vanished.

Even though he'd only had possession of the ship for three weeks, climbing back onto the *Rocinante* felt like going home. Using gentle touches on the keel ladder, he made his way up to the cockpit. He pulled himself into the copilot's couch, strapped in, and closed his eyes.

The ship was silent. With the reactor off-line, and no one aboard, nothing was moving at all. The flexible docking tube that connected the *Roci* to the station transmitted very little vibration to the ship. Holden could close his eyes and drift in the straps and disconnect from everything around him.

It would have been peaceful except that every time he'd closed his eyes for the past month, the fading ghost lights behind his eyelids had been Ade winking and blowing away like dust. The voice at the back of his head was McDowell's as he tried to save his ship right up to the very last second. He wondered if he'd have them for the rest of his life, coming out to haunt him every time he found a moment of quiet.

He remembered the old-timers from his navy days. Grizzled lifers who could soundly sleep while two meters away their shipmates played a raucous game of poker or watched the vids with the volume all the way up. Back then he'd assumed it was just learned behavior, the body adapting so it could get enough rest in an environment that never really had downtime. Now he wondered if those vets found the constant noise preferable. A way to keep their lost shipmates away. They probably went home after their twenty and never slept again. He opened his eyes and watched a small green telltale blink on the pilot's console.

It was the only light in the room, and it illuminated nothing. But its slow fade in and out was somehow comforting. A quiet heartbeat for the ship.

He told himself that Fred was right; a trial was the right thing to

hope for. But he wanted that stealth ship in Alex's gun sights. He wanted that unknown crew to live through the terrifying moment when all the countermeasures have failed, the torpedoes are seconds from impact, and absolutely nothing can stop them.

He wanted them to have that same last gasp of fear he'd heard through Ade's mic.

For a time, he displaced the ghosts in his head with violent vengeance fantasies. When they stopped working, he floated down to the personnel deck, strapped into his cot, and tried to sleep. The *Rocinante* sang him a lullaby of air recyclers and silence.

Chapter Twenty: Miller

Miller sat at an open café, the tunnel wide above him. Grass grew tall and pale in the public commons, and the ceiling glowed full-spectrum white. Ceres Station had come unmoored. Orbital mechanics and inertia kept it physically where it had always been, but the stories about it had changed. The point defenses were the same. The tensile strength of the port blast doors was the same. The ephemeral shield of political status was all they'd lost, and it was everything.

Miller leaned forward and sipped his coffee.

There were children playing on the commons. He thought of them as children, though he remembered thinking of himself as an adult at that age. Fifteen, sixteen years old. They wore OPA armbands. The boys spoke in loud, angry voices about tyranny and freedom. The girls watched the boys strut. The ancient, animal story, the same whether it was on a spinning rock surrounded by hard vacuum or the stamp-sized chimpanzee preserves on Earth. Even in the Belt, youth brought invulnerability, immortality, the unshakable conviction that for you, things would be different. The laws of physics would cut you a break, the missiles would never hit, the air would never hiss out into nothing. Maybe for other people—the patched-together fighting ships of the OPA, the water haulers, the Martian gunships, the *Scopuli,* the *Canterbury,* the *Donnager,* the hundred other ships that had died in small actions since the system had turned itself into a battlefield—but not you. And when youth was lucky enough to survive its optimism, all Miller had left was a little fear, a little envy, and the overwhelming sense of life's fragility. But he had three month's worth of company script in his account and a lot of free time, and the coffee wasn't bad.

"You need anything, sir?" the waiter asked. He didn't look any older than the kids on the grass. Miller shook his head.

Five days had passed since Star Helix pulled its contract. The governor of Ceres was gone, smuggled out on a transport before the news had gone wide. The Outer Planets Alliance had announced the inclusion of Ceres among official OPA-held real estate, and no one had said otherwise. Miller had spent the first day of his unemployment drunk, but his bender had an oddly pro forma feel. He'd descended into the bottle because it was familiar, because it was what you did when you'd lost the career that defined you.

The second day, he'd gotten through the hangover. The third, he'd gotten bored. All through the station, security forces were making the kind of display he'd expected, preemptive peacekeeping. The few political rallies and protests ended fast and hard, and the citizens of

Ceres didn't much care. Their eyes were on their monitors, on the war. A few locals with busted heads getting thrown into prison without charges were beneath notice. And Miller was personally responsible for none of it.

The fourth day, he'd checked his terminal and discovered that 80 percent of his docking log requests had come through before Shaddid had shut his access down. Over a thousand entries, any one of which could be the only remaining lead to Julie Mao. So far, no Martian nukes were on their way to crack Ceres. No demands of surrender. No boarding forces. It could all change in a moment, but until it did, Miller was drinking coffee and auditing ship records, about one every fifteen minutes. Miller figured that if Holden was the last ship in the log, he'd find him in about six weeks.

The *Adrianopole,* a third-gen prospector, had docked at Pallas within the arrival window. Miller checked the open registration, frustrated again at how little information was there compared to the security databases. Owned by Strego Anthony Abramowitz. Eight citations for substandard maintenance, banned from Eros and Ceres as a danger to the port. An idiot and an accident waiting to happen, but the flight plan seemed legitimate, and the history of the ship was deep enough not to smell new-minted. Miller deleted the entry.

The *Badass Motherfucker,* a freight hauler doing a triangle between Luna, Ganymede, and the Belt. Owned by MYOFB Corporation out of Luna. A query to the public bases at Ganymede showed it had left the port there at the listed time and just hadn't bothered to file a flight plan. Miller tapped the screen with a fingernail. Not exactly how he'd fly under the radar. Anyone with authority would roust that ship just for the joy of doing it. He deleted the entry.

His terminal chimed. An incoming message. Miller flipped over to it. One of the girls on the commons shrieked and the others laughed. A sparrow flew past, its wings humming in the constant recycler-driven breeze.

Havelock looked better than when he'd been on Ceres. Happier. The dark circles were gone from his eyes, and the shape of his face had subtly softened, as if the need to prove himself in the Belt had changed his bones and now he was falling back into his natural form.

"Miller!" the recording said. "I heard about Earth cutting Ceres just before I got your message. Bad luck. I'm sorry to hear Shaddid fired you. Between the two of us, she's a pompous idiot. The rumor I've heard is Earth is doing everything it can to stay out of the war, including giving up any station that it's expecting to be a point of contention. You know how it is. You've got a pit bull on one side of you and a rottweiler on the other, first thing you do is drop your steak."

Miller chuckled.

"I've signed on with Protogen security, big-company private army bullshit. But the pay is worth putting up with their delusions of grandeur. The contract's supposed to be on Ganymede, but with the crap going on right now, who knows how it'll really play out? Turns out Protogen's got a training base in the Belt. I'd never heard about it, but it's supposed to be quite the gymnasium. I know they're hiring on, and I'd be happy to put in a word for you. Just let me know, and I'll get you together with the induction recruiter, get you off that damned rock."

Havelock smiled.

"Take care of yourself, partner," the Earther said. "Keep in touch."

Protogen. Pinkwater. Al Abbiq. Small corporate security forces that the big transorbital companies used as private armies and mercenary forces to rent out as needed. AnnanSec had the Pallas security contract, and had for years, but it was Mars-based. The OPA was probably hiring, but probably not him.

It had been years since he'd tried to find work. He'd assumed that particular struggle was behind him, that he was going to die working the Ceres Station security contract. Now that events had thrown him out, everything had an odd floating feeling. Like the gap between getting hit and feeling the pain. He needed to find another job. He needed to do more than send a couple messages out to his old partners. There were employment firms. There were bars on Ceres that would hire an ex-cop for a bouncer. There were gray markets that would take anyone capable of giving them a veneer of legality.

The last thing that made sense was to sit around, ogling girls in the park and chasing down leads on a case that he hadn't been meant to follow up on in the first place.

The *Dagon* had come into Ceres just a little ahead of the arrival window. Owned by the Glapion Collective, who were, he was pretty sure, an OPA front. That made it a good fit. Except the flight plan had been put in just a few hours after the *Donnager* blew, and the exit record from Io looked solid. Miller shifted it into a file he was keeping for ships that earned a second look.

The *Rocinante,* owned by Silencieux Courant Holdings out of Luna, was a gas hauler that had landed at Tycho just hours before the end of the arrival window. Silencieux Courant was a medium-sized corporate entity with no obvious ties to the OPA, and the flight plan from Pallas was plausible. Miller put his fingertip over the delete key, then paused. He sat back.

Why was a gas hauler going between Pallas and Tycho? Both stations were gas *consumers.* Flying from consumer to consumer without hitting a supply in the middle was a good way to not cover

your docking fees. He put in a request for the flight plan that had taken the *Rocinante* to Pallas from wherever it had been before, then sat back to wait. If the records were cached in the Ceres servers, the request shouldn't take more than a minute or two. The notification bar estimated an hour and a half, so that meant the request was getting forwarded to the docking systems at Pallas. It hadn't been in the local backup.

Miller stroked his chin; five days of stubble had almost reached the beginning of a beard. He felt a smile starting. He did a definition search on *Rocinante*. Literally meaning "no longer a workhorse," its first entry was as the name of Don Quixote's horse.

"That you, Holden?" Miller said to the screen. "You out tilting at windmills?"

"Sir?" the waiter said, but Miller waved him away.

There were hundreds of entries still to be looked at and dozens at least in his second-look folder. Miller ignored them, staring at the entry from Tycho as if by sheer force of will he could make more information appear on the screen. Then, slowly, he pulled up the message from Havelock, hit the respond key, and looked into the tiny black pinprick of the terminal's camera.

"Hey, partner," he said. "Thanks for the offer. I may take you up on it, but I've got some kinks I need to work out before I jump. You know how it is. If you can do me a favor, though… I need to keep track of a ship, and I've only got the public databases to work from, plus which Ceres may be at war with Mars by now. Who knows, you know? Anyway, if you can put a level one watch on any flight plans for her, drop me a note if anything comes up… I'd buy you a drink sometime."

He paused. There had to be something more to say.

"Take care of yourself, partner."

He reviewed the message. On-screen, he looked tired, the smile a little fake, the voice a little higher than it sounded in his head. But it said what it needed to say. He sent it.

This was what he'd been reduced to. Access gone, service gun confiscated—though he still had a couple of drops in his hole—money running out. He had to play the angles, call in favors for things that should have been routine, outthink the system for any scrap. He'd been a cop, and they'd turned him into a mouse. *Still,* he thought, sitting back in the chair. *Pretty good work for a mouse.*

The sound of detonation came from spinward, then voices raised in anger. The kids on the commons stopped their games of touch-me touch-you and stared. Miller stood up. There was smoke, but he couldn't see flames. The breeze picked up as the station air cleaners raised the flow to suck away particulates so the sensors didn't think there was a risk of fanning a fire. Three gunshots rang out in fast

succession, and the voices came together in a rough chant. Miller couldn't make words out of it, but the rhythm told him all he needed to know. Not a disaster, not a fire, not a breach. Just a riot.

The kids were walking toward the commotion. Miller caught one by the elbow. She couldn't have been more than sixteen, her eyes near black, her face a perfect heart shape.

"Don't go over there," he said. "Get your friends together and walk the other way."

The girl looked at him, his hand on her arm, the distant commotion.

"You can't help," he said.

She pulled her arm free.

"Gotta try, yeah?" she said. "Podría intentar, you know." *You could too.*

"Just did," Miller said as he put his terminal in its case and walked away. Behind him, the sounds of the riot grew. But he figured the police could take care of it.

Over the next fourteen hours, the system net reported five riots on the station, some minor structural damage. Someone he'd never heard of announced a tri-phase curfew; people out of their holes more than two hours before or after their work shifts would be subject to arrest. Whoever was running the show now thought they could lock down six million people and create stability and peace. He wondered what Shaddid thought about that.

Outside Ceres, things were getting worse. The deep astronomy labs on Triton had been occupied by a band of prospectors sympathetic to the OPA. They'd turned the array in-system and had been broadcasting the location of every Martian ship in the system along with high-definition images of the surface of Mars, down to the topless sunbathers in the dome parks. The story was that a volley of nukes was on its way to the station, and the array would be bright dust within a week. Earth's imitation of a snail was picking up the pace as Earth- and Luna-based companies pulled back down the gravity well. Not all of them, not even half, but enough to send the Terran message: *Count us out.* Mars appealed for solidarity; the Belt appealed for justice or, more often, told the birthplace of humanity to go fuck itself.

It wasn't out of control yet, but it was ramping up. Another few incidents and it wouldn't matter how it had started. It wouldn't matter what the stakes were. Mars knew the Belt couldn't win, and the Belt

knew it had nothing to lose. It was a recipe for death on a scale humanity had never seen.

And, like Ceres, there wasn't much Miller could do about that either. But he could find James Holden, find out what had happened to the *Scopuli,* follow the leads back to Julie Mao. He was a detective. It was what he did.

As he packed up his hole, throwing out the collected detritus that grew over decades like a crust, he talked to her. He tried to explain why he'd given up everything to find her. After his discovery of the *Rocinante,* he could hardly avoid the word *quixotic.*

His imaginary Julie laughed or was touched. She thought he was a sad, pathetic little man, since just tracking her down was the nearest to a purpose in life he could find. She dressed him down as being a tool of her parents. She wept and put her arms around him. She sat with him in some almost unimaginable observation lounge and watched the stars.

He fit everything he had into a shoulder bag. Two changes of clothes, his papers, his hand terminal. A picture of Candace from back in better days. All the hard copy of Julie's case he'd made before Shaddid wiped his partition, including three pictures of Julie. He thought that everything he'd lived through should have added up to more, and then changed his mind. It was probably about right.

He spent one last day ignoring the curfew, making his rounds of the station, saying goodbye to the few people he felt he might miss or might miss him. To his surprise, Muss, who he found at a tense and uncomfortable police bar, actually teared up and hugged him until his ribs ached from it.

He booked passage on a transport to Tycho. His bunk ran him a quarter of his remaining funds. It occurred to him, not for the first time, that he had to find Julie pretty damn quick or find a job to support him through the investigation. But it hadn't happened yet, and the universe wasn't stable enough anymore to make long-range planning more than a sour joke.

As if to prove the point, his terminal chimed as he was in the line to board the transport.

"Hey, partner," Havelock said. "That favor you needed? I got a bite. Your package just put in a flight plan for Eros. I'm sending the public-access data attached. I'd get you the good stuff, but these Protogen guys are tight. I mentioned you to the recruiter and she seemed interested. So let me know, right? Talk to you soon."

Eros.

Great.

Miller nodded at the woman behind him, stepped out of line, and walked to the kiosk. By the time a screen was open, they were calling

final boarding for the Tycho transport. Miller turned in his ticket, got a nominal refund, and spent a third of what he still had in his account for a ticket to Eros. Still, it could have been worse. He could have been on the way before he got word. He had to start thinking about it as good luck, not bad.

The passage confirmation came through with a chime like a gently struck triangle.

"I hope I'm right about this," he said to Julie. "If Holden's not there, I'm gonna feel pretty stupid."

In his mind, she smiled ruefully.

Life is risk, she said.

Chapter Twenty-One: Holden

Ships were small. Space was always at a premium, and even on a monster like the *Donnager,* the corridors and compartments were cramped and uncomfortable. On the *Rocinante,* the only rooms where Holden could spread out his arms without touching two walls were the galley and the cargo bay. No one who flew for a living was claustrophobic, but even the most hardened Belt prospector could recognize the rising tension of being ship-bound. It was the ancient stress response of the trapped animal, the subconscious knowledge that there was literally nowhere to go that you couldn't see from where you were already standing. Getting off the ship at port was a sudden and sometimes giddying release of tension.

It often took the form of a drinking game.

Like all professional sailors, Holden had sometimes ended long flights by drinking himself into a stupor. More than once he'd wandered into a brothel and left only when they threw him out with an emptied account, a sore groin, and a prostate as dry as the Sahara desert. So when Amos staggered into his room after three days on station, Holden knew exactly what the big mechanic felt like.

Holden and Alex were sharing the couch and watching a newsfeed. Two talking heads were discussing the Belter actions with words like *criminal, terrorist,* and *sabotage.* The Martians were "peacekeepers." It was a Martian news channel. Amos snorted and collapsed on the couch. Holden muted the screen.

"Having a good shore leave, sailor?" Holden asked with a grin.

"I'll never drink again," Amos groaned.

"Naomi's comin' over with some chow she got at that sushi place," Alex said. "Nice raw fish wrapped in fake seaweed."

Amos groaned again.

"That's not nice, Alex," Holden said. "Let the man's liver die in peace."

The door to the suite slid open again, and Naomi came in carrying a tall stack of white boxes.

"Food's here," she said.

Alex opened all the boxes and started handing around small disposable plates.

"Every time it's your turn to get food, you get salmon rolls. It shows a lack of imagination," Holden said as he began putting food on his plate.

"I like salmon," Naomi replied.

The room got quiet as people ate; the only sounds were the clack of

plastic chopsticks and the wet squish of things being dipped in wasabi and soy. When the food was gone, Holden wiped his eyes, made runny by the heat in his sinuses, and leaned his chair all the way back. Amos used one of his chopsticks to scratch under the cast on his leg.

"You guys did a pretty good job setting this," he said. "It's the thing on my body that hurts the least right now."

Naomi grabbed the remote off Holden's armrest and turned the volume back on. She began spooling through the different feeds. Alex closed his eyes and slid down on the loveseat, lacing his fingers across his belly and sighing contentedly. Holden felt a sudden and irrational annoyance at his crew for being so comfortable.

"Everyone had enough of sucking on Fred's teat yet?" he said. "I know I have."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Amos said, shaking his head. "I'm just getting started."

"I mean," Holden said, "how long are we going to hang around on Tycho, drinking and whoring and eating sushi on Fred's expense account?"

"As long as I can?" Alex said.

"You have a better plan, then," Naomi said.

"I don't have a plan, but I want to get back in the game. We were full of righteous anger and dreams of vengeance when we got here, and a couple of blowjobs and hangovers later, it's like nothing ever happened."

"Uh, vengeance kinda requires someone to avenge upon, Cap," Alex said. "Case you ain't noticed, we're lackin' in that department."

"That ship is still out there, somewhere. The people who ordered it to shoot are, too," Holden said.

"So," Alex replied slowly, "we take off and start flyin' in a spiral until we run into it?"

Naomi laughed and threw a soy packet at him.

"I don't know what we do," Holden said, "but sitting here while the people who killed our ship keep doing whatever it is *they're* doing is making me nuts."

"We've been here three days," Naomi said. "We deserve some comfortable beds and decent food and a chance to blow off steam. Don't try to make us feel bad for taking it."

"Besides, Fred said we'll get those bastards at the trial," Amos said.

"If there's a trial," Holden replied. "*If.* It won't happen for months, or maybe even years. And even then, Fred's looking at those treaties. Amnesty might be another bargaining chip, right?"

"You were quick enough to agree to his terms, Jim," Naomi said. "Changed your mind?"

"If Fred wants depositions in exchange for letting us patch up and

rest, the price was cheap. That doesn't mean I think a trial will fix everything, or that I want to be sidelined until it happens."

He gestured at the faux-leather couch and huge wall screen around them.

"Besides, this can be a prison. It's a nice one, but as long as Fred controls the purse strings, he owns us. Make no mistake."

Naomi's brow crinkled; her eyes grew serious.

"What's the option, sir?" she asked. "Leave?"

Holden folded his arms, his mind turning over everything he'd said as if he was hearing it for the first time. Saying things out loud actually made them clearer.

"I'm thinking we look for work," he said. "We've got a good ship. More importantly, we have a sneaky ship. It's fast. We can run without a transponder if we need to. Lots of people will need things moved from place to place with a war on. Gives us something to do while we wait for Fred's trial, and a way to put money in our pockets so we can get off the dole. And, as we fly from place to place, we can keep our ears and eyes open. Never know what we'll find. And seriously, how long can you three stand to be station rats?"

There was a moment's silence.

"I could station rat for another… week?" Amos said.

"It ain't a bad idea, Cap," Alex said with a nod.

"It's your decision, Captain," Naomi said. "I'll stick with you, and I like the idea of getting my own money again. But I hope you're not in a hurry. I could really use a few more days off."

Holden clapped his hands and jumped to his feet.

"Nope," he said. "Having a plan makes all the difference. Downtime's easier to enjoy when I know it'll end."

Alex and Amos got up together and headed for the door. Alex had won a few dollars playing darts, and now he and Amos were in the process of turning it into even more money at the card tables.

"Don't wait up, Boss," Amos said to Naomi. "I'm feeling lucky today."

They left, and Holden went to the small kitchen nook to make coffee. Naomi followed him in.

"One other thing," she said.

Holden tore open the sealed coffee packet, the strong odor filling the room.

"Shoot," he said.

"Fred is taking care of all the arrangements for Kelly's body. He'll hold it here in state until we go public with our survival. Then he'll ship it back to Mars."

Holden filled the coffeemaker with water from the tap and started the machine. It made soft gurgling sounds.

“Good. Lieutenant Kelly deserves all the respect and dignity we can give him.”

“It got me thinking about that data cube he had. I haven’t been able to hack it. It’s some kind of military über-encryption that makes my head hurt. So… ”

“Just say it,” Holden said with a frown.

“I want to give it to Fred. I know it’s a risk. We have no idea what’s on it, and for all his charm and hospitality, Fred’s still OPA. But he was also high-ranking UN military. And he’s got a serious brain trust here on the station. He might be able to open it up.”

Holden thought for a moment, then nodded.

“Okay, let me sit with that. I want to know what Yao was trying to get off the ship, but—”

“Yeah.”

They shared a companionable silence as the coffee brewed. When it was finished, Holden poured two mugs and handed one to Naomi.

“Captain,” she said, then paused. “Jim. I’ve been a pain-in-the-ass XO so far. I’ve been stressed out and scared shitless about eighty percent of the time.”

“You do an amazing job of hiding that fact,” Holden replied.

Naomi nodded the compliment away.

“Anyway, I’ve been pushy about some things that I probably shouldn’t have been.”

“Not a big deal.”

“Okay, let me finish,” she said. “I want you to know I think you’ve done a great job of keeping us alive. You keep us focused on the problems we can solve instead of feeling sorry for ourselves. You keep everyone in orbit around you. Not everyone can do that, I couldn’t do it, and we’ve needed that stability.”

Holden felt a glow of pride. He hadn’t expected it, and he didn’t trust it, but it felt good all the same.

“Thank you,” Holden said.

“I can’t speak for Amos and Alex, but I plan to stick it out. You’re not just the captain because McDowell is dead. You’re *our* captain, as far as I’m concerned. Just so you know.”

She looked down, blushing as if she’d just confessed something. Maybe she had.

“I’ll try not to blow it,” he said.

“I’d appreciate that, sir.”

Fred Johnson's office was like its occupant: big, intimidating, and overflowing with things that needed to be done. The room was easily two and a half square meteres, making it larger than any single compartment on the *Rocinante*. His desk was made of actual wood, looked at least a hundred years old, and smelled of lemon oil. Holden sat in a chair that was just a little lower than Fred's, and looked at the mounds of file folders and papers covering every flat surface.

Fred had sent for him and then spent the first ten minutes after he'd arrived speaking on the phone. Whatever he was talking about, it sounded technical. Holden assumed it was related to the giant generation ship outside. It didn't bother him to be ignored for a few minutes, since the wall behind Fred was entirely covered by a bleedingly high-definition screen pretending to be a window. It was showing a spectacular view of the *Nauvoo* moving past as the station spun. Fred spoiled the scene by putting the phone down.

"Sorry about that," he said. "The atmosphere processing system has been a nightmare from day one. When you're going a hundred plus years on only the air you can bring with you, the loss tolerances are… stricter than usual. Sometimes it's difficult to impress the importance of fine details on the contractors."

"I was enjoying the view," Holden said, gesturing at the screen.

"I'm starting to wonder if we'll be able to get it done on schedule."

"Why?"

Fred sighed and leaned his chair back with a squeak.

"It's the war between Mars and the Belt."

"Material shortages, then?"

"Not just that. Pirate casts claiming to speak for the OPA are working into a frenzy. Belt prospectors with homemade torpedo launchers are firing on Martian warships. They get wiped out in response, but every now and then one of those torpedoes hits and kills a few Martians."

"Which means Mars starts shooting first."

Fred nodded and then got up and started pacing the room.

"And then even honest citizens on legitimate business start getting worried about going out of the house," he said. "We've had over a dozen late shipments so far this month, and I'm worried it will stop being delays and start being cancellations."

"You know, I've been thinking about the same thing," Holden said.

Fred acted as though he hadn't heard.

"I've been on that bridge," Fred said. "Unidentified ship coming on you, and a decision to make? No one wants to press the button. I've watched a ship get bigger and bigger on the scope while my finger was on the trigger. I remember begging them to stop."

Holden said nothing. He'd seen it too. There was nothing to say.

Fred let silence hang in the air for a moment, then shook his head and straightened up.

"I need to ask you a favor," Fred said.

"You can always ask, Fred. You've paid for that much," Holden replied.

"I need to borrow your ship."

"The *Roci*?" Holden said. "Why?"

"I need to have something picked up and delivered here, and I need a ship that can stay quiet and run past Martian picket ships if it needs to."

"The *Rocinante* is definitely the right ship, then, but that didn't answer my question. Why?"

Fred turned his back to Holden and looked at the view screen. The nose of the *Nauvoo* was just vanishing from sight. The view turned to the flat, star-speckled black of forever.

"I need to pick someone up on Eros," he said. "Someone important. I've got people who can do it, but the only ships we've got are light freighters and a couple of small shuttles. Nothing that can make the trip quickly enough or have a hope of running away if trouble starts."

"Does this person have a name? I mean, you keep saying you don't want to fight, but the other unique thing about my ship is that it's the only one here with guns. I'm sure the OPA has a whole list of things they'd like blown up."

"You don't trust me."

"Nope."

Fred turned back around and gripped the back of his chair. His knuckles were white. Holden wondered if he'd gone too far.

"Look," Holden said, "you talk a good game about peace and trials and all that. You disavow the pirate casts. You have a nice station filled with nice people. I have every reason to believe you are what you say you are. But we've been here three days, and the first time you tell me about your plans, you ask to borrow my ship for a secret mission. Sorry. If I'm part of this, I get full access; no secrets. Even if I knew for a fact, which I don't, that you had nothing but good intentions, I still wouldn't go along with the cloak-and-dagger bullshit."

Fred stared at him for a few seconds, then came around his chair and sat down. Holden found he was tapping his fingers on his thigh nervously and forced himself to stop. Fred's eyes flicked down at Holden's hand and then back up. He continued to stare.

Holden cleared his throat.

"Look, you're the big dog here. Even if I didn't know who you used to be, you'd scare the shit out of me, so don't feel the need to prove it. But no matter how scared I am, I'm not backing down on this."

Fred's hoped-for laughter didn't come. Holden tried to swallow without gulping.

"I bet every captain you ever flew under thought you were a gigantic pain in the ass," Fred said finally.

"I believe my record reflects that," Holden said, trying to hide his relief.

"I need to fly to Eros and find a man named Lionel Polanski, and then bring him back to Tycho."

"That's only a week out if we push," Holden said, doing the math in his head.

"The fact that Lionel doesn't actually exist complicates the mission."

"Yeah, okay. Now I'm confused," Holden agreed.

"You wanted in?" Fred said, the words taking on a quiet ferocity. "Now you're in. Lionel Polanski exists only on paper, and owns things that Mr. Tycho doesn't want to own. Including a courier ship called the *Scopuli*."

Holden leaned forward in his chair, his face intense.

"You now have my undivided attention," he said.

"The nonexistent owner of the *Scopuli* checked into a flophouse on one of the shit levels of Eros. We only just got the message. We have to work on the assumption that whoever got the room knows our operations intimately, needs help, and can't ask for it openly."

"We can leave in an hour," Holden said breathlessly.

Fred held up his hands in a gesture that was surprisingly Belter for an Earth man.

"When," Fred asked, "did this turn into *you* leaving?"

"I won't loan my ship, but I'll definitely rent it out. My crew and I were talking about getting jobs, actually. Hire us. Deduct whatever's fair for services you've already rendered."

"No," Fred said. "I need *you*."

"You don't," Holden replied. "You need our depositions. And we're not going to sit here waiting a year or two for sanity to reign. We'll all do video depositions, sign whatever affidavits you want us to as to their authenticity, but we're leaving to find work one way or the other. You might as well make use of it."

"No," Fred said. "You're too valuable to take risks with your lives."

"What if I throw in the data cube the captain of the *Donnager* was trying to liberate?"

The silence was back, but it had a different feel to it.

"Look," Holden said, pressing on. "You need a ship like the *Roci*. I've got one. You need a crew for her. I've got that too. And you're as hungry to know what's on that cube as I am."

"I don't like the risk."

"Your other option is to throw us in the brig and commandeer the

ship. There's some risks in that too."

Fred laughed. Holden felt himself relax.

"You'll still have the same problem that brought you here," Fred said. "Your ship looks like a gunship, no matter what its transponder is saying."

Holden jumped up and grabbed a piece of paper from Fred's desk. He started writing on it with a pen snatched from a decorative pen set.

"I've been thinking about that. You've got full manufacturing facilities here. And we're supposed to be a light gas freighter. So," he said as he sketched a rough outline of the ship, "we weld on a bunch of empty compressed-gas storage tanks in two bands around the hull. Use them to hide the tubes. Repaint the whole thing. Weld on a few projections to break up the hull profile and hide us from ship-recognition software. It'll look like shit and screw up the aerodynamics, but we won't be near atmo anytime soon. It'll look exactly like what it is: something a bunch of Belters slapped together in a hurry."

He handed the paper to Fred. Fred began laughing in earnest, either at the terrible drawing or at the absurdity of the whole thing.

"You could give a pirate a hell of a surprise," he said. "If I do this, you and your crew will record my depositions and hire on as an independent contractor for errands like the Eros run and appear on my behalf when the peace negotiations start."

"Yes."

"I want the right to outbid anyone else who tries to hire you. No contracts without my counteroffer."

Holden held out his hand, and Fred shook it.

"Nice doing business with you, Fred."

As Holden left the office, Fred was already on the comm with his machine-shop people. Holden pulled out his portable terminal and called up Naomi.

"Yeah," she said.

"Pack up the kids, we're going to Eros."

Chapter Twenty-Two: Miller

The people-mover to Eros was small, cheap, and overcrowded. The air recyclers had the plastic-and-resin smell of long-life industrial models that Miller associated with warehouses and fuel depots. The lights were cheap LEDs tinted a false pink that was supposed to flatter the complexion but instead made everyone look like undercooked beef. There were no cabins, only row after row of formed laminate seating and two long walls with five-stacks of bunks that the passengers could hot-swap. Miller had never been on a cheapjack transport before, but he knew how they worked. If there was a fight, the ship's crew would pump riot gas into the cabin, knock everyone out, and put anyone who'd been in the scuffle under restraint. It was a draconian system, but it did tend to keep passengers polite. The bar was always open and the drinks were cheap. Not long ago Miller would have found that enticing.

Instead, he sat on one of the long seats, his hand terminal open. Julie's case file—what he had reconstructed of it—glowed before him. The picture of her, proud and smiling, in front of the *Razorback,* the dates and records, her jiu jitsu training. It seemed like very little, considering how large the woman had grown in his life.

A small newsfeed crawled down the terminal's left side. The war between Mars and the Belt escalated, incident after incident, but the secession of Ceres Station was the top news. Earth was taken to task by Martian commentators for failing to stand united with its fellow inner planet, or at least for not handing over the Ceres security contract to Mars. The scattershot reaction of the Belt ran the gamut from pleasure at seeing Earth's influence fall back down the gravity well, to strident near-panic at the loss of Ceres' neutrality, to conspiracy theories that Earth was fomenting the war for its own ends.

Miller reserved judgment.

"I always think of pews."

Miller looked over. The man sitting next to him was about Miller's age; the fringe of gray hair, the soft belly. The man's smile told Miller the guy was a missionary, out in the vacuum saving souls. Or maybe it was the name tag and Bible.

"The seats, I mean," the missionary said. "They always make me think of going to church, the way they're all lined up, row after row. Only instead of a pulpit, we have bunk beds."

"Our Lady of Sleeping Through It," Miller said, knowing he was getting drawn into conversation but unable to stop himself. The missionary laughed.

“Something like that,” he said. “Do you attend church?”

“Haven’t in years,” Miller said. “I was a Methodist when I was anything. What flavor are you selling?”

The missionary lifted his hands in a gesture of harmlessness that went back to the African plains of the Pleistocene. *I have no weapon; I seek no fight.*

“I’m just going back to Eros from a conference on Luna,” he said. “My proselytizing days are long behind me.”

“I didn’t think those ever ended,” Miller said.

“They don’t. Not officially. But after a few decades, you come to a place where you realize that there’s really no difference between trying and not trying. I still travel. I still talk to people. Sometimes we talk about Jesus Christ. Sometimes we talk about cooking. If someone is ready to accept Christ, it doesn’t take much effort on my part to help them. If they aren’t, no amount of hectoring them does any good. So why try?”

“Do people talk about the war?” Miller asked.

“Often,” the missionary said.

“Anyone make sense of it?”

“No. I don’t believe war ever does. It’s a madness that’s in our nature. Sometimes it recurs; sometimes it subsides.”

“Sounds like a disease.”

“The herpes simplex of the species?” the missionary said with a laugh. “I suppose there are worse ways to think of it. I’m afraid that as long as we’re human, it will be with us.”

Miller looked over at the wide, moon-round face.

“As long as we’re human?” he said.

“Some of us believe that we shall all eventually become angels,” the missionary said.

“Not the Methodists.”

“Even them, eventually,” the man said, “but they probably won’t go first. And what brings you to Our Lady of Sleeping Through It?”

Miller sighed, sitting back against the unyielding chair. Two rows down, a young woman shouted at two boys to stop jumping on the seats and was ignored. A man behind them coughed. Miller took a long breath and let it out slowly.

“I was a cop on Ceres,” he said.

“Ah. The change of contract.”

“That,” Miller said.

“Taking up work on Eros, then?”

“More looking up an old friend,” Miller said. Then, to his own surprise, he went on. “I was born on Ceres. Lived there my whole life. This is the… fifth? Yeah, fifth time I’ve been off station.”

“Do you plan to go back?”

“No,” Miller said. He sounded more certain that he’d known. “No, I think that part of my life is pretty much over.”

“That must be painful,” the missionary said.

Miller paused, letting the comment settle. The man was right; it should have been painful. Everything he’d ever had was gone. His job, his community. He wasn’t even a cop anymore, his checked-in-luggage handgun notwithstanding. He would never eat at the little East Indian cart at the edge of sector nine again. The receptionist at the station would never nod her greeting to him as he headed in for his desk again. No more nights at the bar with the other cops, no more off-color stories about busts gone weird, no more kids flying kites in the high tunnels. He probed himself like a doctor searching for inflammation. Did it hurt here? Did he feel the loss there?

He didn’t. There was only a sense of relief so profound it approached giddiness.

“I’m sorry,” the missionary said, confused. “Did I say something funny?”

Eros supported a population of one and a half million, a little more than Ceres had in visitors at any given time. Roughly the shape of a potato, it had been much more difficult to spin up, and its surface velocity was considerably higher than Ceres’ for the same internal g. The old shipyards protruded from the asteroid, great spiderwebs of steel and carbon mesh studded with warning lights and sensor arrays to wave off any ships that might come in too tight. The internal caverns of Eros had been the birthplace of the Belt. From raw ore to smelting furnace to annealing platform and then into the spines of water haulers and gas harvesters and prospecting ships. Eros had been a port of call in the first generation of humanity’s expansion. From there, the sun itself was only a bright star among billions.

The economics of the Belt had moved on. Ceres Station had spun up with newer docks, more industrial backing, more people. The commerce of shipping moved to Ceres, while Eros remained a center of ship manufacture and repair. The results were as predictable as physics. On Ceres, a longer time in dock meant lost money, and the berth fee structure reflected that. On Eros, a ship might wait for weeks or months without impeding the flow of traffic. If a crew wanted a place to relax, to stretch, to get away from one another for a while, Eros was the port of call. And with the lower docking fees, Eros

Station found other ways to soak money from its visitors: Casinos. Brothels. Shooting galleries. Vice in all its commercial forms found a home in Eros, its local economy blooming like a fungus fed by the desires of Belters.

A happy accident of orbital mechanics put Miller there half a day ahead of the *Rocinante*. He walked through the cheap casinos, the opioid bars and sex clubs, the show fight areas where men or women pretended to beat one another senseless for the pleasure of the crowds. Miller imagined Julie walking with him, her sly smile matching his own as he read the great animated displays. RANDOLPH MAK, HOLDER OF THE BELT FREEFIGHT CHAMPIONSHIP FOR SIX YEARS, AGAINST MARTIAN KIVRIN CARMICHAEL IN A FIGHT TO THE DEATH!

Surely not fixed, Julie said drily in his mind.

Wonder which one's going to win, he thought, and imagined her laughing.

He'd stopped at a noodle cart, two new yens' worth of egg noodles in black sauce steaming in their cone, when a hand clapped on his shoulder.

"Detective Miller," a familiar voice said. "I think you're outside your jurisdiction."

"Why, Inspector Sematimba," Miller said. "As I live and breathe. You give a girl the shakes, sneaking up like that."

Sematimba laughed. He was a tall man, even among Belters, with the darkest skin Miller had ever seen. Years before, Sematimba and Miller had coordinated on a particularly ugly case. A smuggler with a cargo of designer euphorics had broken with his supplier. Three people on Ceres had been caught in the crossfire, and the smuggler had shipped out for Eros. The traditional competitiveness and insularity of the stations' respective security forces had almost let the perp slip away. Only Miller and Sematimba had been willing to coordinate outside the corporate channels.

"What brings you," Sematimba said, leaning against a thin steel railing and gesturing at the tunnel, "to the navel of the Belt, the glory and power that is Eros?"

"Following up on a lead," Miller said.

"There's nothing good here," Sematimba said. "Ever since Protogen pulled out, things have been going from bad to worse."

Miller sucked up a noodle.

"Who's the new contract?" he asked.

"CPM," Sematimba said.

"Never heard of them."

"*Carne Por la Machina,*" Sematimba said, and pulled a face: exaggerated bluff masculinity. He thumped his breast and growled, then let the imitation go and shook his head. "New corporation out of

Luna. Mostly Belters on the ground. Make themselves out to be all hard core, but they're mostly amateurs. All bluster, no balls. Protogen was inner planets, and that was a problem, but they were serious as hell. They broke heads, but they kept the peace. These new assholes? Most corrupt bunch of thugs I've ever worked for. I don't think the board of governors is going to renew when the contract's up. I didn't say that, but it's true."

"I've got an old partner signed up with Protogen," Miller said.

"They're not bad," Sematimba said. "Almost wish I'd picked them in the divorce, you know?"

"Why didn't you?" Miller asked.

"You know how it is. I'm from here."

"Yeah," Miller said.

"So. You didn't know who was running the playhouse? You aren't here looking for work."

"Nope," Miller said. "I'm on sabbatical. Doing some travel for myself these days."

"You've got money for that?"

"Not really. But I don't mind going on the cheap. For a while, you know. You heard anything about a Juliette Mao? Goes by Julie?"

Sematimba shook his head.

"Mao-Kwikowski Mercantile," Miller said. "Came up the well and went native. OPA. It was an abduction case."

"Was?"

Miller leaned back. His imagined Julie raised her eyebrows.

"It's changed a little since I got it," Miller said. "May be connected to something. Kind of big."

"How big are we talking about?" Sematimba said. All trace of jocularity had vanished from his expression. He was all cop now. Anyone but Miller would have found the man's empty, almost angry face intimidating.

"The war," Miller said. Sematimba folded his arms.

"Bad joke," he said.

"Not joking."

"I consider us friends, old man," Sematimba said. "But I don't want any trouble around here. Things are unsettled as it stands."

"I'll try to stay low-profile."

Sematimba nodded. Down the tunnel, an alarm blared. Only security, not the earsplitting ditone of an environmental alert. Sematimba looked down the tunnel as if squinting would let him see through the press of people, bicycles, and food carts.

"I'd better go look," he said with an air of resignation. "Probably some of my fellow officers of the peace breaking windows for the fun of it."

“Great to be part of a team like that,” Miller said.

“How would you know?” Sematimba said with a smile. “If you need something… ”

“Likewise,” Miller said, and watched the cop wade into the sea of chaos and humanity. He was a large man, but something about the passing crowd’s universal deafness to the alarm’s blare made him seem smaller. *A stone in the ocean,* the phrase went. One star among millions.

Miller checked the time, then pulled up the public docking records. The *Rocinante* showed as on schedule. The docking berth was listed. Miller sucked down the last of his noodles, tossed the foam cone with the thin smear of black sauce into a public recycler, found the nearest men’s room, and when he was done there, trotted toward the casino level.

The architecture of Eros had changed since its birth. Where once it had been like Ceres—webworked tunnels leading along the path of widest connection—Eros had learned from the flow of money: All paths led to the casino level. If you wanted to go anywhere, you passed through the wide whale belly of lights and displays. Poker, blackjack, roulette, tall fish tanks filled with prize trout to be caught and gutted, mechanical slots, electronic slots, cricket races, craps, rigged tests of skill. Flashing lights, dancing neon clowns, and video screen advertisements blasted the eyes. Loud artificial laughter and merry whistles and bells assured you that you were having the time of your life. All while the smell of thousands of people packed into too small a space competed with the scent of heavily spiced vat-grown meat being hawked from carts rolling down the corridor. Greed and casino design had turned Eros into an architectural cattle run.

Which was exactly what Miller needed.

The tube station that arrived from the port had six wide doors, which emptied to the casino floor. Miller accepted a drink from a tired-looking woman in a G-string and bared breasts and found a screen to stand at that afforded him a view of all six doors. The crew of the *Rocinante* had no choice but to come through one of those. He checked his hand terminal. The docking logs showed the ship had arrived ten minutes earlier. Miller pretended to sip his drink and settled in to wait.

Chapter Twenty-Three: Holden

The casino level of Eros was an all-out assault on the senses. Holden hated it.

"I love this place," Amos said, grinning.

Holden pushed his way through a knot of drunk middle-aged gamblers, who were laughing and yelling, to a small open space near a row of pay-by-the-minute wall terminals.

"Amos," he said, "we'll be going to a less touristy level, so watch our backs. The flophouse we're looking for is in a rough neighborhood."

Amos nodded. "Gotcha, Cap."

While Naomi, Alex, and Amos blocked him from view, Holden reached behind his back to adjust the pistol that pulled uncomfortably on his waistband. The cops on Eros were pretty uptight about people walking around with guns, but there was no way he was going to "Lionel Polanski" unarmed. Amos and Alex were both carrying too, though Amos kept his in the right pocket of his jacket and his hand never left it. Only Naomi flatly refused to carry a gun.

Holden led the group toward the nearest escalators, with Amos, casting the occasional glance behind, in the rear. The casinos of Eros stretched for three seemingly endless levels, and even though they moved as quickly as possible, it took half an hour to get away from the noise and crowds. The first level above was a residential neighborhood and disorientingly quiet and neat after the casino's chaos and noise. Holden sat down on the edge of a planter with a nice array of ferns in it and caught his breath.

"I'm with you, Captain. Five minutes in that place gives me a headache," Naomi said, and sat down next to him.

"You kidding me?" Amos said. "I wish we had more time. Alex and I took almost a grand off those fish at the Tycho card tables. We'd probably walk out of here fucking millionaires."

"You know it," Alex said, and punched the big mechanic on the shoulder.

"Well, if this Polanski thing turns out to be nothing, you have my permission to go make us a million dollars at the card tables. I'll wait for you on the ship," Holden said.

The tube system ended at the first casino level and didn't start again until the level they were on. You could choose not to spend your money at the tables, but they made sure you were punished for doing so. Once the crew had climbed into a car and started the ride to Lionel's hotel, Amos sat down next to Holden.

“Somebody’s following us, Cap,” he said conversationally. “Wasn’t sure till he climbed on a couple cars down. Behind us all through the casinos too.”

Holden sighed and put his face in his hands.

“Okay, what’s he look like?” he said.

“Belter. Fifties, or maybe forties with a lot mileage. White shirt and dark pants. Goofy hat.”

“Cop?”

“Oh yeah. But no holster I can see,” Amos said.

“All right. Keep an eye on him, but no need to get too worried. Nothing we’re doing here is illegal,” Holden said.

“You mean, other than arriving in our stolen Martian warship, sir?” Naomi asked.

“You mean our *perfectly legitimate* gas freighter that all the paperwork and registry data says is *perfectly legitimate*?” Holden replied with a thin smile. “Yeah, well, if they’d seen through that, they would have stopped us at the dock, not followed us around.”

An advertising screen on the wall displayed a stunning view of multicolored clouds rippling with flashes of lightning, and encouraged Holden to take a trip to the amazing dome resorts on Titan. He’d never been to Titan. Suddenly he wanted to go there very much. A few weeks of sleeping late, eating in fine restaurants, and lying on a hammock, watching Titan’s colorful atmosphere storm above him sounded like heaven. Hell, as long as he was fantasizing, he threw in Naomi walking over to his hammock with a couple of fruity-looking drinks in her hands.

She ruined it by talking.

“This is our stop,” she said.

“Amos, watch our friend, see if he gets off the train with us,” Holden said as he got up and headed to the door.

After they got off and walked a dozen steps down the corridor, Amos whispered, “Yep,” at his back. *Shit.* Well, definitely a tail, but there wasn’t really any reason not to go ahead and check up on Lionel. Fred hadn’t asked them to do anything *with* whoever was pretending to be the *Scopuli*’s owner. They couldn’t very well be arrested for knocking on a door. Holden whistled a loud and jaunty tune as he walked, to let his crew and whoever was following them know he wasn’t worried about a thing.

He stopped when he saw the flophouse.

It was dark and dingy and exactly the sort of place where people got mugged or worse. Broken lights created dark corners, and there wasn’t a tourist in sight. He turned to give Alex and Amos meaningful looks, and Amos shifted his hand in his pocket. Alex reached under his coat.

The lobby was mostly empty space, with a pair of couches at one

end next to a table covered with magazines. A sleepy-looking older woman sat reading one. Elevators were recessed into the wall at the far end, next to a door marked STAIRS. In the middle was the check-in desk, where, in lieu of a human clerk, a touch screen terminal let guests pay for their rooms.

Holden stopped next to the desk and turned around to look at the woman sitting on the couch. Graying hair, but good features and an athletic build. In a flophouse like this, that probably meant a prostitute reaching the end of her shelf life. She pointedly ignored his stare.

"Is our tail still with us?" Holden asked in a quiet voice.

"Stopped outside somewhere. Probably just watching the door now," Amos replied.

Holden nodded and hit the inquiry button on the check-in screen. A simple menu would let him send a message to Lionel Polanski's room, but Holden exited the system. They knew Lionel was still checked in, and Fred had given them the room number. If it was someone playing games, no reason to give him a heads-up before Holden knocked on the door.

"Okay, he's still here, so let's—" Holden said, and then stopped when he saw the woman from the couch standing right behind Alex. He hadn't heard or seen her approach.

"You need to come with me," she said in a hard voice. "Walk to the stairwell slowly, stay at least three meters ahead of me the entire time. Do it now."

"Are you a cop?" Holden asked, not moving.

"I'm the person with the gun," she said, a small weapon appearing like magic in her right hand. She pointed it at Alex's head. "So do what I say."

Her weapon was small and plastic and had some kind of battery pack. Amos pulled his heavy slug thrower out and aimed it at her face.

"Mine's bigger," he said.

"Amos, don't—" was all Naomi had time to say before the stairwell door burst open and half a dozen men and women armed with compact automatic weapons came into the room, yelling at them to drop their guns.

Holden started to put his hands up when one of them opened fire, the weapon coughing out rounds so fast it sounded like someone ripping construction paper; it was impossible to hear the separate shots. Amos threw himself to the floor. A line of bullet holes stitched across the chest of the woman with the taser, and she fell backward with a soft, final sound.

Holden grabbed Naomi by one hand and dragged her behind the check-in desk. Someone in the other group was yelling, "Cease fire!

Cease fire!" but Amos was already shooting back from his position, prone on the floor. A yelp of pain and a curse told Holden he'd probably hit someone. Amos rolled sideways to the desk, just in time to avoid a hail of slugs that tore up the floor and wall and made the desk shudder.

Holden reached for his gun, but the front sight caught in his waistband. He yanked it out, tearing his underwear, then crawled on his knees to the edge of the desk and looked out. Alex was lying on the floor on the other side of one of the couches, gun drawn and face white. As Holden looked, a burst of gunfire hit the couch, blowing stuffing into the air and making a line of holes in the back of the couch not more than twenty centimeters above Alex's head. The pilot reached his pistol around the corner of the couch and blindly fired off half a dozen shots, yelling at the same time.

"Fucking assholes!" Amos yelled, then rolled out and fired a couple more shots and rolled back before the return fire started.

"Where are they?" Holden yelled at him.

"Two are down, the rest in the stairwell!" Amos yelled back over the sound of return fire.

Out of nowhere a burst of rounds bounced off the floor past Holden's knee. "Shit, someone's flanking us!" Amos cried out, then moved farther behind the desk and away from the shots.

Holden crawled to the other side of the desk and peeked out. Someone was moving low and fast toward the hotel entrance. Holden leaned out and took a couple shots at him, but three guns opened up from the stairwell doorway and forced him back behind the desk.

"Alex, someone's moving to the entrance!" Holden screamed at the top of his lungs, hoping the pilot might be able to get off a shot before they were all chopped to pieces by crossfire.

A pistol barked three times by the entrance. Holden risked a look. Their tail with the goofy hat crouched by the door, a gun in his hand, the machine gun–toting flanker lying still at his feet. Instead of looking at them, the tail was pointing his gun toward the stairwell.

"No one shoot the guy with the hat!" Holden yelled, then moved back to the edge of the desk.

Amos put his back to the desk and popped the magazine from his gun. As he fumbled around in his pocket for another, he said, "Guy is probably a cop."

"Extra especially do *not* shoot any cops," Holden said, then fired a few shots at the stairwell door.

Naomi, who'd spent the entire gunfight so far on the floor with her arms over her head, said, "They might all be cops."

Holden squeezed off a few more shots and shook his head.

"Cops don't carry small, easily concealable machine guns and

ambush people from stairwells. We call those death squads," he said, though most of his words were drowned out by a barrage of gunfire from the stairwell. Afterward came a few seconds of silence.

Holden leaned back out in time to see the door swing shut.

"I think they're bugging out," he said, keeping his gun trained on the door anyway. "Must have another exit somewhere. Amos, keep your eye on that door. If it opens, start shooting." He patted Naomi on the shoulder. "Stay down."

Holden rose from behind the now ruined check-in kiosk. The desk facade had splintered and the underlying stone showed through. Holden held his gun barrel-up, his hands open. The man in the hat stood, considering the corpse at his feet, then looked up as Holden came near.

"Thanks. My name is Jim Holden. You are?"

The man didn't speak for a second. When he did, his voice was calm. Almost weary. "Cops will be here soon. I need to make a call or we're all going to jail."

"Aren't you the cops?" Holden asked.

The other man laughed; it was a bitter, short sound, but with some real humor behind it. Apparently Holden had said something funny.

"Nope. Name's Miller."

Chapter Twenty-Four: Miller

Miller looked at the dead man—the man he'd just killed—and tried to feel something. There was the trailing adrenaline rush still ramping up his heartbeat. There was a sense of surprise that came from walking into an unexpected firefight. Past that, though, his mind had already fallen into the long habit of analysis. One plant in the main room so Holden and his crew wouldn't see anything too threatening. A bunch of trigger-happy yahoos in the stairwell to back her up. *That* had gone well.

It was a slapdash effort. The ambush had been set by people who either didn't know what they were doing or didn't have the time or resources to do it right. If it hadn't been improvised, Holden and his three buddies would have been taken or killed. And him along with them.

The four survivors of the *Canterbury* stood in the remains of the firefight like rookies at their first bust. Miller felt his mind shift back half a step as he watched everything without watching anything in particular. Holden was smaller than he'd expected from the video feeds. It shouldn't have been surprising; he was an Earther. The man had the kind of face that was bad at hiding things.

"Thanks. My name is Jim Holden. You are?"

Miller thought of six different answers and turned them all aside. One of the others—a big man, solid, with a bare scalp—was pacing out the room, his eyes unfocused the same way Miller's were. Of Holden's four, that was the only guy who'd seen serious gunplay before.

"The cops will be here soon," Miller said. "I need to make a call or we're all going to jail."

The other man—thinner, taller, East Indian by the look of him—had been hiding behind a couch. He was sitting on his haunches now, his eyes wide and panicky. Holden had some of the same look, but he was doing a better job of keeping control. The burdens, Miller thought, of leadership.

"Aren't you the cops?"

Miller laughed.

"Nope," he said. "Name's Miller."

"Okay," the woman said. "Those people just tried to kill us. Why did they do that?"

Holden took a half step toward her voice even before he turned to look at her. Her face was flushed, full lips pressed thin and pale. Her features showed a far-flung racial mix that was unusual even in the

melting pot of the Belt. Her hands weren't shaking. The big one had the most experience, but Miller put the woman down as having the best instincts.

"Yeah," Miller said. "I noticed."

He pulled out his hand terminal and opened a link to Sematimba. The cop accepted a few seconds later.

"Semi," Miller said. "I'm really sorry about this, but you know how I was going stay low-profile?"

"Yes?" the local cop said, drawing the word out to three syllables.

"Didn't work out. I was heading to a meeting with a friend… "

"A meeting with a friend," Sematimba echoed. Miller could imagine the man's crossed arms even thought they didn't show in the frame.

"And I happened to see a bunch of tourists in the wrong place at the wrong time. It got out of hand."

"Where are you?" Sematimba asked. Miller gave him the station level and address. There was a long pause while Sematimba consulted with some internal communication software that would have been part of Miller's tool set once. The man's sigh was percussive. "I don't see anything. Were there shots fired?"

Miller looked at the chaos and ruin around them. About a thousand different alerts should have gone out with the first weapon fired. Security should have been swarming toward them.

"A few," he said.

"Strange," Sematimba said. "Stay put. I'll be there."

"Will do," Miller said, and dropped the connection.

"Okay," Holden said. "Who was that?"

"The real cops," Miller said. "They'll be here soon. It'll be fine."

I think it'll be fine. It occurred to him that he was treating the situation like he was still on the inside, a part of the machine. That wasn't true anymore, and pretending it was might have consequences.

"He was following us," the woman said to Holden. And then, to Miller, she said, "You were following us."

"I was," Miller said. He didn't think he sounded rueful, but the big guy shook his head.

"It was the hat," the big one said. "Stood out some."

Miller swept off his porkpie and considered it. Of course the big one had been the one to make him. The other three were competent amateurs, and Miller knew that Holden had done some time in the UN Navy. But Miller gave it better than even money that the big one's background check would be interesting reading.

"Why were you following us?" Holden asked. "I mean, I appreciate the part where you shot the people who were shooting at us, but I'd still like to know that first part."

"I wanted to talk to you," Miller said. "I'm looking for someone."

There was a pause. Holden smiled.

"Anyone in particular?" he asked.

"A crew member of the *Scopuli,*" Miller said.

"The *Scopuli*?" Holden said. He started to glance at the woman and stopped himself. There was something there. The *Scopuli* meant something to him beyond what Miller had seen on the news.

"There was nobody on her when we got there," the woman said.

"Holy shit," the shaky one behind the couch said. It was the first thing he'd said since the firefight ended, and he repeated it five or six more times in quick succession.

"What about you?" Miller asked. "*Donnager* blew you to Tycho, and now here. What's that about?"

"How did you know that?" Holden said.

"It's my job," Miller said. "Well, it used to be."

The answer didn't appear to satisfy the Earther. The big guy had fallen in behind Holden, his face a friendly cipher: No trouble, unless there was trouble, and then maybe a whole lot of trouble. Miller nodded, half to the big guy, half to himself.

"I had a contact in the OPA who told me you didn't die on the *Donnager,*" Miller said.

"They just *told* you that?" the woman asked, banked outrage in her voice.

"He was making a point at the time," Miller said. "Anyway, he said it, and I took it from there. And in about ten minutes, I'm going to make sure Eros security doesn't throw all of you in a hole, and me with you. So if there's anything at all you want to tell me—like what you're doing here, for instance—this would be the right time."

The silence was broken only by the sound of recyclers laboring to clear the smoke and particulate dust of gunfire. The shaky one stood. Something about the way he held himself looked military. Ex-something, Miller assumed, but not a ground pounder. Navy, maybe; Martian at a guess. He had the vocal twang some of them affected.

"Ah, fuck it, Cap'n," the big one said. "He shot the flank guy for us. He may be an asshole, but he's okay by me."

"Thank you, Amos," Holden said. Miller filed that. The big one was Amos. Holden put his hands behind his back, returning his gun to his waistband.

"We're here to look for someone too," he said. "Probably someone from the *Scopuli.* We were just double-checking the room when everyone decided to start shooting at us."

"Here?" Miller said. Something like emotion trickled into his veins. Not hope, but dread. "Someone off the *Scopuli* is in this flop right now?"

"We think so," Holden said.

Miller looked out the flophouse lobby's front doors. A small, curious crowd had started to gather in the tunnel. Crossed arms, nervous glances. He knew how they felt. Sematimba and his police were on the way. The gunmen who'd attacked Holden and his crew weren't mounting another attack, but that didn't mean they were gone. There might be another wave. They could have fallen back to a better position to wait for Holden to advance.

But what if Julie was here right now? How could he come this far and stop in the lobby? To his surprise, he still had his gun drawn. That was unprofessional. He should have holstered it. The only other one still drawn was the Martian's. Miller shook his head. Sloppy. He needed to stop that.

Still, he had more than half a magazine left in the pistol.

"What room?" he asked.

The flophouse corridors were thin and cramped. The walls had the impervious gloss of warehouse paint, and the carpet was carbon-silicate weave that would wear out more slowly than bare stone. Miller and Holden went first, then the woman and the Martian—Naomi and Alex, their names were—then Amos, trailing and looking back over his shoulder. Miller wondered if anyone but he and Amos understood how they were keeping the others safe. Holden seemed to know and be irritated by it; he kept edging ahead.

The doors of the rooms were identical fiberglass laminates, thin enough to be churned out by the thousand. Miller had kicked in a hundred like them in his career. A few here and there were decorated by longtime residents—with a painting of improbably red flowers, a whiteboard with a string where a pen had once been attached, a cheap reproduction of an obscene cartoon acting out its punch line in a dimly glowing infinite loop.

Tactically, it was a nightmare. If the ambushing forces stepped out of doors in front of and behind them, all five could be slaughtered in seconds. But no slugs flew, and the only door that opened disgorged an emaciated, long-bearded man with imperfect eyes and a slack mouth. Miller nodded at the man as they passed, and he nodded back, possibly more surprised by someone's acknowledging his presence than by the drawn pistols. Holden stopped.

"This is it," he murmured. "This is the room."

Miller nodded. The others came up in a clump, Amos casually

hanging back, his eyes on the corridor retreating behind them. Miller considered the door. It would be easy to kick in. One strong blow just above the latch mechanism. Then he could go in low and to the left, Amos high and to the right. He wished Havelock were there. Tactics were simpler for people who'd trained together. He motioned Amos to come up close.

Holden knocked on the door.

"What are you…?" Miller whispered fiercely, but Holden ignored him.

"Hello?" Holden called. "Anyone there?"

Miller tensed. Nothing happened. No voice, no gunfire. Nothing. Holden seemed perfectly at ease with the risk he'd just taken. From the expression on Naomi's face, Miller took it this wasn't the first time he'd done things this way.

"You want that open?" Amos said.

"Kinda do," Miller said at the same moment Holden said, "Yeah, kick it down."

Amos looked from one to the other, not moving until Holden nodded at him. Then Amos shifted past them, kicked the door open in one blow, and staggered back, cussing.

"You okay?" Miller asked.

The big man nodded once through a pale grimace.

"Yeah, busted my leg a while back. Cast just came off. Keep forgetting about that," he said.

Miller turned back to the room. Inside, it was as black as a cave. No lights came on, not even the dim glow of monitors and sensory devices. Miller stepped in, pistol drawn. Holden was close behind him. The floor made the crunching sound of gravel under their feet, and there was an odd astringent smell that Miller associated with broken screens. Behind it was another smell, much less pleasant. He chose not to think about that one.

"Hello?" Miller said. "Anyone here?"

"Turn on the lights," Naomi said from behind them. Miller heard Holden patting the wall panel, but no light came up.

"They're not working," Holden said.

The dim spill from the corridor gave almost nothing. Miller kept his gun steady in his right hand, ready to empty it toward muzzle flash if anyone opened fire from the darkness. With his left, he took out his hand terminal, thumbed on the backlight, and opened a blank white writing tablet. The room came into monochrome. Beside him, Holden did the same.

A thin bed pressed against one wall, a narrow tray beside it. The bedding was knotted like the remnant of a bad night's sleep. A closet stood open, empty. The hulking form of an empty vacuum suit lay on

the floor like a mannequin with a misplaced head. An old entertainment console hung on the wall across from the cot, its screen shattered by half a dozen blows. The wall was dimpled where blows intended to bread the LED sconces had missed. Another hand terminal added its glow, and another. Hints of color started to come into the room—the cheap gold of the walls, the green of the blankets and sheet. Under the cot, something glimmered. An older-model hand terminal. Miller crouched as the others stepped in.

"Shit," Amos said.

"Okay," Holden said. "Nobody touches anything. Period. Nothing." It was the most sensible thing Miller had heard the man say.

"Someone put up a bitch of a fight," Amos muttered.

"No," Miller said. It had been vandalism, maybe. It hadn't been a struggle. He pulled a thin-film evidence bag out of his pocket and turned it inside out over his hand like a glove before picking up the terminal, flipping the plastic over it, and setting off the sealing charge.

"Is that… blood?" Naomi asked, pointing to the cheap foam mattress. Wet streaks pooled on the sheet and pillow, not more than a fingers' width, but dark. Too dark even for blood.

"No," Miller said, shoving the terminal into his pocket.

The fluid marked a thin path toward the bathroom. Miller raised a hand, pushing the others back as he crept toward the half-open door. Inside the bathroom, the nasty background smell was much stronger. Something deep, organic, and intimate. Manure in a hothouse, or the aftermath of sex, or a slaughterhouse. All of them. The toilet was brushed steel, the same model they used in prisons. The sink matched. The LED above it and the one in the ceiling had both been destroyed. In the light of his terminal, like the glow of a single candle, black tendrils reached from the shower stall toward the ruined lights, bent and branching like skeletal leaves.

In the shower stall, Juliette Andromeda Mao lay dead.

Her eyes were closed, and that was a mercy. She'd cut her hair differently since she'd taken the pictures Miller had seen, and it changed the shape of her face, but she was unmistakable. She was nude, and barely human. Coils of complex growth spilled from her mouth, ears, and vulva. Her ribs and spine had grown spurs like knives that stretched pale skin, ready to cut themselves free of her. Tubes stretched from her back and throat, crawling up the walls behind her. A deep brown slush had leaked from her, filling the shower pan almost three centimeters high. He sat silently, willing the thing before him not to be true, trying to force himself awake.

What did they do to you? he thought. *Oh, kid. What did they do?*

"Ohmygod," Naomi said behind him.

"Don't touch anything," he said. "Get out of the room. Into the hall.

Do it now."

The light in the next room faded as the hand terminals retreated. The twisting shadows momentarily gave her body the illusion of movement. Miller waited, but no breath lifted the bent rib cage. No flicker touched her eyelids. There was nothing. He rose, carefully checking his cuffs and shoes, and walked out to the corridor.

They'd all seen it. He could tell from the expressions, they'd all seen. And they didn't know any better than he did what it was. Gently, he pulled the splintered door closed and waited for Sematimba. It wasn't long.

Five men in police riot armor with shotguns made their way down the hall. Miller walked forward to meet them, his posture better than a badge. He could see them relax. Sematimba came up behind them.

"Miller?" he said. "The hell is this? I thought you said you were staying put."

"I didn't leave," he said. "Those are the civilians back there. The dead guys downstairs jumped them in the lobby."

"Why?" Sematimba demanded.

"Who knows?" Miller said. "Roll them for spare change. That's not the problem."

Sematimba's eyebrows rose. "I've got four corpses down there, and they're not the problem."

Miller nodded down the corridor.

"Fifth one's up here," he said. "It's the girl I was looking for."

Sematimba's expression softened. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Nah," Miller said. He couldn't accept sympathy. He couldn't accept comfort. A gentle touch would shatter him, so he stayed hard instead. "But you're going to want the coroner on this one."

"It's bad, then?"

"You've got no idea," Miller said. "Listen, Semi. I'm in over my head here. Seriously. Those boys down there with the guns? If they weren't hooked in with your security force, there would have been alarms as soon as the first shot was fired. You know this was a setup. They were waiting for these four. And the squat fella with the dark hair? That's James Holden. He's not even supposed to be alive."

"Holden that started the war?" Sematimba said.

"That's the one," Miller said. "This is deep. Drowning deep. And you know what they say about going in after a drowning man, right?"

Sematimba looked down the corridor. He nodded.

"Let me help you," Sematimba said, but Miller shook his head.

"I'm too far gone. Forget me. What happened was you got a call. You found the place. You don't know me, you don't know them, you've got no clue what happened. Or you come along and drown with me. Your pick."

“You don’t leave the station without telling me?”

“Okay,” Miller said.

“I can live with that,” Sematimba said. Then, a moment later: “That’s really Holden?”

“Call the coroner,” Miller said. “Trust me.”

Chapter Twenty-Five: Holden

Miller gestured at Holden and headed for the elevator without waiting to see if he was following. The presumption irritated him, but he went anyway.

"So," Holden said, "we were just in a gunfight where we killed at least three people, and now we're just leaving? No getting questioned or giving a statement? How exactly does that happen?" Holden asked.

"Professional courtesy," Miller said, and Holden couldn't tell if he was joking.

The elevator door opened with a muffled ding, and Holden and the others followed Miller inside. Naomi was closest to the panel, so she reached out to press the lobby button, but her hand was shaking so badly that she had to stop and clench it into a fist. After a deep breath, she reached out a now steady finger and pressed the button.

"This is bullshit. Being an ex-cop doesn't give you a license to get in gunfights," Holden said to Miller's back.

Miller didn't move, but he seemed to shrink a little bit. His sigh was heavy and unforced. His skin seemed grayer than before.

"Sematimba knows the score. Half the job is knowing when to look the other way. Besides, I promised we wouldn't leave the station without letting him know."

"Fuck that," Amos said. "You don't make promises for us, pal."

The elevator came to a stop and opened onto the bloody scene of the gunfight. A dozen cops were in the room. Miller nodded at them and they nodded back. He led the crew out of the lobby to the corridor, then turned around.

"We can work that out later," Miller said. "Right now, let's get someplace we can talk."

Holden agreed with a shrug. "Okay, but you're paying."

Miller headed off down the corridor toward the tube station.

As they followed, Naomi put a hand on Holden's arm and slowed him down a bit so that Miller could get ahead. When he was far enough away, she said, "He knew her."

"Who knew who?"

"He," Naomi said, nodding at Miller, "knew her." She jerked her head back toward the crime scene behind them.

"How do you know?" Holden said.

"He wasn't expecting to find her there, but he knew who she was. Seeing her like that was a shock."

"Huh, I didn't get that at all. He's seemed like Mr. Cool all through this."

“No, they were friends or something. He’s having trouble dealing with it, so maybe don’t push him too hard,” she said. “We might need him.”

The hotel room Miller got was only slightly better than the one they’d found the body in. Alex immediately headed for the bathroom and locked the door. The sound of water running in the sink wasn’t quite loud enough to cover the pilot’s retching.

Holden plopped down on the small bed’s dingy comforter, forcing Miller to take the room’s one uncomfortable-looking chair. Naomi sat next to Holden on the bed, but Amos stayed on his feet, prowling around the room like a nervous animal.

“So, talk,” Holden said to Miller.

“Let’s wait for the rest of the gang to finish up,” Miller replied with a nod toward the bathroom.

Alex came out a few moments later, his face still white, but now freshly washed.

“Are you all right, Alex?” Naomi asked in a soft voice.

“Five by five, XO,” Alex said, then sat down on the floor and put his head in his hands.

Holden stared at Miller and waited. The older man sat and played with his hat for a minute, then tossed it onto the cheap plastic desk that cantilevered out from the wall.

“You knew Julie was in that room. How?” Miller said.

“We didn’t even know her name was Julie,” Holden replied. “We just knew that it was someone from the *Scopuli.*”

“You should tell me how you knew that,” Miller said, a frightening intensity in his eyes.

Holden paused a moment. Miller had killed someone who had been trying to kill them, and that certainly helped make the case that he was a friend, but Holden wasn’t about to sell out Fred and his group on a hunch. He hesitated, then went halfway.

“The fictional owner of the *Scopuli* had checked into that flophouse,” he said. “It made sense that it was a member of the crew raising a flag.”

Miller nodded. “Who told you?” he said.

“I’m not comfortable telling you that. We believed the information was accurate,” Holden replied. “The *Scopuli* was the bait that someone used to kill the *Canterbury*. We thought someone from the *Scopuli*

might know why everyone keeps trying to kill us."

Miller said, "Shit," and then leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling.

"You've been looking for Julie. You'd hoped we were looking for her too. That we knew something," Naomi said, not making it a question.

"Yeah," Miller said.

It was Holden's turn to ask why.

"Parents sent a contract to Ceres looking for her to be sent home. It was my case," Miller said.

"So you work for Ceres security?"

"Not anymore."

"So what are you doing here?" Holden asked.

"Her family was connected to something," Miller replied. "I just naturally hate a mystery."

"And how did you know it was bigger than just a missing girl?"

Talking to Miller felt like digging through granite with a rubber chisel. Miller grinned humorlessly.

"They fired me for looking too hard."

Holden consciously decided not to be annoyed by Miller's non-answer. "So let's talk about the death squad in the hotel."

"Yeah, seriously, what the fuck?" Amos said, finally pausing in his pacing. Alex took his head out of his hands and looked up with interest for the first time. Even Naomi leaned forward on the edge of the bed.

"No idea," Miller replied. "But someone knew you were coming."

"Yeah, thanks for the brilliant police work," Amos said with a snort. "No way we woulda figured that out on our own."

Holden ignored him. "But they didn't know why, or they would have already gone up to Julie's room and gotten whatever they wanted."

"Does that mean Fred's been compromised?" Naomi said.

"Fred?" Miller asked.

"Or maybe someone figured out the Polanski thing too, but didn't have a room number," Holden said.

"But why come out guns blazing like that?" Amos said. "Doesn't make any sense to shoot us."

"*That* was a mistake," Miller said. "I saw it happen. Amos here drew his gun. Somebody overreacted. They were yelling cease-fire right up until you folks started shooting back."

Holden began ticking off points on his fingers.

"So someone finds out we're headed to Eros, and that it is related to the *Scopuli.* They even know the hotel, but not the room."

"They don't know it's Lionel Polanski either," Naomi said. "They

could have looked it up at the desk, just like we did."

"Right. So they wait for us to show, and have a squad of gunmen ready to take us in. But that goes to shit and it turns into a gunfight in the lobby. They absolutely *don't* see you coming, Detective, so they aren't omniscient."

"Right," Miller said. "The whole thing screams last minute. Grab you guys and find out what you're looking for. If they'd had more time, they could have just searched the hotel. Might have taken two or three days, but it could have been done. They didn't, so that means grabbing you was easier."

Holden nodded. "Yes," he said. "But that means that they already had teams here. Those didn't seem like locals to me."

Miller paused, looking disconcerted.

"Now you say it, me either," he agreed.

"So whoever it is, they already have teams of gunmen on Eros, and they can redeploy them to come at a moment's notice to pick us up," Holden said.

"And enough pull with security that they could have a firefight and nobody came," Miller said. "Police didn't know anything was happening until I called them."

Holden cocked his head to one side, then said, "Shit, we really need to get out of here."

"Wait a minute," Alex said loudly. "Just wait a goddamn minute here. How come no one is talkin' about the *mutant horror show* in that room? Was I the only one that saw that?"

"Yeah, Jesus, what was that all about?" Amos said quietly.

Miller reached into his coat pocket and took out the evidence bag with Julie's hand terminal in it.

"Any of you guys a techie?" he asked. "Maybe we could find out."

"I could probably hack it," Naomi said. "But there's no way I'm touching that thing until we know what did that to her and that it isn't catching. I'm not pushing my luck by handling anything she's touched."

"You don't have to touch it. Keep the bag sealed. Just use it right through the plastic. The touch screen should still work."

Naomi paused for a second, then reached out and took the bag.

"Okay, give me a minute," she said, then set to work on it.

Miller leaned back in his chair again, letting out another heavy sigh.

"So," Holden said. "Did you know Julie before this? Naomi seems to think finding her dead like that really knocked you for a loop."

Miller shook his head slowly. "You get a case like that, you look into whoever it is. You know, personal stuff. Read their e-mail. Talk to the people they know. You get a picture."

Miller stopped talking and rubbed his eyes with his thumbs. Holden

didn't push him, but he started talking again anyway.

"Julie was a good kid," Miller said as if he were confessing something. "She flew a mean racing ship. I just… I wanted to get her back alive."

"It's got a password," Naomi said, holding up the terminal. "I could hack the hardware, but I'd have to open the case."

Miller reached out and said, "Let me give it a try."

Naomi handed the terminal to him, and he tapped a few characters on the screen and handed it back.

"*Razorback,*" Naomi said. "What's that?"

"It's a sled," Miller replied.

"Is he talking to us?" Amos said, pointing his chin at Miller. " 'Cause there's no one else here, but I swear half the time I don't know what the fuck he's on about."

"Sorry," Miller said. "I've been working more or less solo. Makes for bad habits."

Naomi shrugged and went back to work with Holden and Miller now looking over her shoulders.

"She's got a lot of stuff on here," Naomi said. "Where to start?"

Miller pointed at a text file simply labeled notes sitting on the terminal's desktop.

"Start there," he said. "She's a fanatic about putting things in the right folders. If she left that on the desktop, it means she wasn't sure where it went."

Naomi tapped on the document to open it up. It expanded into a loosely organized collection of text that read like someone's diary.

> *First off, get your shit together. Panic doesn't help. It never helps. Deep breaths, figure this out, make the right moves. fear is the mind-killer. Ha. Geek.*
>
> *Shuttle Pros:*
> *No reactor, just batteries. V. low radiation.*
> *Supplies for eight*
> *Lots of reaction mass*
>
> *Shuttle Cons:*
> *No Epstein, no torch*
> *Comm not just disabled, but* physically removed *(feeling a little paranoid about leaks, guys?)*
>
> *Closest transit is Eros. Is that where we were going? Maybe go*

*someplace else? On just teakettle, this is gonna be a **slow** boat. Another transit adds seven more weeks. Eros, then.*

I've got the Phoebe bug, no way around it. Not sure how, but that brown shit was everywhere. It's anaerobic, must have touched some. Doesn't matter how, just work the problem.

I just slept for THREE WEEKS. Didn't even get up to pee. What does that?

I'm so fucked.

Things you need to remember:

** BA834024112*
** Radiation kills. No reactor on this shuttle, but keep the lights off. Keep the e-suit on. Video asshat said this thing eats radiation. Don't feed it.*
** Send up a flag. Get some help. You work for the smartest people in the system. They'll figure something out.*
** Stay away from people. Don't spread the bug. Not coughing up the brown goo yet. No idea when that starts.*
** Keep away from bad guys—as if you know who they are. Fine. So keep away from everyone. Incognito is my name. Hmm. Polanski?*

Damn. I can feel it. I'm hot all the time, and I'm starving. Don't eat. Don't feed it. Feed a cold, starve a flu? Other way around? Eros is a day out, and then help is on the way. Keep fighting.

Safe on Eros. Sent up the flag. Hope the home office is watching. Head hurts. Something's happening on my back. Lump over my kidneys. Darren turned into goo. Am I going to be a suit full of jelly?

Sick now. Things coming out of my back and leaking that brown stuff everywhere. Have to take the suit off. If you read this, don't let anyone touch the Brown stuff. Burn me. I'm burning up.

Naomi put the terminal down, but no one spoke for a moment. Finally, Holden said, “Phoebe bug. Anyone have an idea?”

“There was a science station on Phoebe,” Miller said. “Inner planets place, no Belters allowed. It got hit. Lots of dead people, but… ”

“She talks about being on a shuttle,” Naomi said. “The *Scopuli* didn’t have a shuttle.”

“There had to be another ship,” Alex said. “Maybe she got the shuttle off it.”

“Right,” Holden said. “They got on another ship, they got infected with this Phoebe bug, and the rest of the crew… I don’t know. Dies?”

“She gets out, not realizing she’s infected till she’s on the shuttle,” Naomi continued. “She comes here, she sends up the flag to Fred, and she dies in that hotel room of the infection.”

“Not, however, turned to goo,” Holden said. “Just really badly… I don’t know. Those tubes and bone spurs. What kind of disease does that?”

The question hung in the air. Again no one spoke. Holden knew they were all thinking the same thing. They hadn’t touched anything in the flophouse room. Did that mean they were safe from it? Or did they have the Phoebe bug, whatever the hell it was? But she’d said anaerobic. Holden was pretty sure that meant you couldn’t get it by breathing it in the air. *Pretty* sure…

“Where do we go from here, Jim?” Naomi asked.

“How about Venus?” Holden said, his voice higher and tighter than he’d expected. “Nothing interesting happening on Venus.”

“Seriously,” Naomi said.

“Okay. Seriously, I think Miller there lets his cop friend know the story, and then we get the hell off of this rock. It’s got to be a bioweapon, right? Someone steals it off a Martian science lab, seeds this shit in a dome, a month later every human being in the city is dead.”

Amos interrupted with a grunt.

“There’s some holes in that, Cap’n,” Amos said. “Like what the fuck does that have to do with taking down the *Cant* and the *Donnager*?”

Holden looked Naomi in the eye and said, “We have a place to look now, don’t we?”

“Yeah, we do,” she said. “BA834024112. That’s a rock designation.”

“What do you think is out there?” Alex asked.

“If I was a betting man, I’d say it’s whatever ship she stole that shuttle from,” Holden replied.

“Makes sense,” Naomi said. “Every rock in the Belt is mapped. You want to hide something, put it in a stable orbit next to one and you can always find it later.”

Miller turned toward Holden, his face even more drawn.

“If you’re going there, I want in,” he said.

“Why?” Holden asked. “No offense, but you found your girl. Your job’s over, right?”

Miller looked at him, his lips a thin line.

“Different case,” Miller said. “Now it’s about who killed her.”

Chapter Twenty-Six: Miller

"Your police friend put a lockdown order on my ship," Holden said. He sounded outraged.

Around them, the hotel restaurant was busy. Last shift's prostitutes mixed with the next shift's tourists and businessmen at the cheap pink-lit buffet. The pilot and the big guy—Alex and Amos—were vying for the last bagel. Naomi sat at Holden's side, her arms crossed, a cup of bad coffee cooling before her.

"We did kill some people," Miller said gently.

"I thought you got us out of that with your secret police handshake," Holden said. "So why's my ship in lockdown?"

"You remember when Sematimba said we shouldn't leave the station without telling him?" Miller said.

"I remember you making some kind of deal," Holden said. "I don't remember agreeing to it."

"Look, he's going to keep us here until he's sure he won't get fired for letting us go. Once he knows his ass is covered, the lock goes down. So let's talk about the part where I rent a berth on your ship."

Jim Holden and his XO exchanged a glance, one of those tiny human burst communications that said more than words could have. Miller didn't know either of them well enough to decode all of it, but he guessed they were skeptical.

They had reason to be. Miller had checked his credit balance before he'd called them. He had enough left for another night in the hotel or a good dinner, but not both. He was spending it on a cheap breakfast that Holden and his crew didn't need and probably wouldn't enjoy, buying good will.

"I need to make very, very sure I understand what you're saying," Holden said as the big one—Amos—returned and sat at his other side holding the bagel. "Are you saying that unless I let you on my ship, your friend is going to keep us here? Because that's blackmail."

"Extortion," Amos said.

"What?" Holden said.

"It's not blackmail," Naomi said. "That would be if he threatened to expose information we didn't want known. If it's just a threat, that's extortion."

"And it's not what I'm talking about," Miller said. "Freedom of the station while the investigation rolls? That's no trouble. Leaving jurisdiction's another thing. I can't hold you here any more than I can cut you loose. I'm just looking for a ride when you go."

"Why?" Holden said.

“Because you’re going to Julie’s asteroid,” Miller said.

“I’m willing to bet there’s no port there,” Holden said. “Did you plan on going anyplace after that?”

“I’m kind of low on solid plans. Haven’t had one yet that actually happened.”

“I hear that,” Amos said. “We’ve been fucked eighteen different ways since we got into this.”

Holden folded his hands on the table, one finger tapping a complicated rhythm on the wood-textured concrete top. It wasn’t a good sign.

“You seem like a… well, like an angry, bitter old man, actually. But I’ve been working water haulers for the past five years. That just means you’d fit in.”

“But,” Miller said, and let the word hang there.

“But I’ve been shot at a lot recently, and the machine guns yesterday were the least lethal thing I’ve had to deal with,” Holden said. “I’m not letting anyone on my ship that I wouldn’t trust with my life, and I don’t actually know you.”

“I can get the money,” Miller said, his belly sinking. “If it’s money, I can cover it.”

“It’s not about negotiating a price,” Holden said.

“Get the money?” Naomi said, her eyes narrowing. “ ‘Get the money,’ as in you don’t have it now?”

“I’m a little short,” Miller said. “It’s temporary.”

“You have an income?” Naomi said.

“More like a strategy,” Miller said. “There’s some independent rackets down on the docks. There always are at any port. Side games. Fights. Things like that. Most of them, the fix is in. It’s how you bribe cops without actually bribing cops.”

“That’s your plan?” Holden said, incredulity in his voice. “Go collect some police bribes?”

Across the restaurant, a prostitute in a red nightgown yawned prodigiously; the john across the table from her frowned.

“No,” Miller said reluctantly. “I play the side bets. A cop goes in, I make a side bet that he’s going to win. I know who the cops are mostly. The house, they know because they’re bribing them. The side bets are with fish looking to feel edgy because they’re playing unlicensed.”

Even as he said it, Miller knew how weak it sounded. Alex, the pilot, came and sat beside Miller. His coffee smelled bright and acidic.

“What’s the deal?” Alex asked.

“There isn’t one,” Holden said. “There wasn’t one before and there still isn’t.”

“It works better than you’d think,” Miller said gamely, and four

hand terminals chimed at once. Holden and Naomi exchanged another, less complicit glance and pulled up their terminals. Amos and Alex already had theirs up. Miller caught the red-and-green border that meant either a priority message or an early Christmas card. There was a moment's silence as they all read something; then Amos whistled low.

"Stage three?" Naomi said.

"Can't say as I like the sound of that," Alex said.

"You mind if I ask?" Miller said.

Holden slid his terminal across the table. The message was plaintext, encoded from Tycho.

> CAUGHT MOLE IN TYCHO COMM STATION. YOUR PRESENCE AND DESTINATION LEAKED TO UNKNOWN PERSONS ON EROS. BE CAREFUL.

"Little late on that," Miller said.

"Keep reading," Holden said.

> MOLE'S ENCRYPTION CODE ALLOWED INTERCEPT OF SUBSIGNAL BROADCAST FROM EROS FIVE HOURS AGO.
>
> INTERCEPTED MESSAGE FOLLOWS: HOLDEN ESCAPED BUT PAYLOAD SAMPLE RECOVERED. REPEAT: SAMPLE RECOVERED. PROCEEDING TO STAGE THREE.

"Any idea what that means?" Holden asked.

"I don't," Miller said, pushing the terminal back. "Except… if the payload sample is Julie's body."

"Which I think we can assume it is," Holden said.

Miller tapped his fingertips on the tabletop, unconsciously copying Holden's rhythm, his mind working through the combinations.

"This thing," Miller said. "The bioweapon or whatever. They were shipping it here. So now it's here. Okay. There's no reason to take out Eros. It's not particularly important to the war when you hold it up to Ceres or Ganymede or the shipyard at Callisto. And if you wanted it dead, there're easier ways. Blow a big fusion bomb on the surface, and crack it like an egg."

"It's not a military base, but it is a shipping hub," Naomi said. "And, unlike Ceres, it's not under OPA control."

"They're shipping her out, then," Holden said. "They're taking their sample out to infect whatever their original target was, and once they're off the station, there's no way we're going to stop it."

Miller shook his head. Something about the chain of logic felt wrong. He was missing something. His imaginary Julie appeared across the room, but her eyes were dark, black filaments pouring down her cheeks like tears.

What am I looking at here, Julie? he thought. *I'm seeing something*

here, but I don't know what it is.

The vibration was a slight, small thing, less than a transport tube's braking stutter. A few plates rattled; the coffee in Naomi's cup danced in a series of concentric circles. Everyone in the hotel went silent with the sudden shared dread of thousands of people made aware of their fragility in the same moment.

"Oh-kay," Amos said. "The fuck was that?" and the emergency Klaxons started blaring.

"Or possibly stage three is something else," Miller said over the noise.

The public-address system was muddy by its nature. The same voice spoke from consoles and speakers that might have been as close as a meter from each other or as far out as earshot would take them. It made every word reverberate, a false echo. Because of that, the voice of the emergency broadcast system enunciated very carefully, each word bitten off separately.

"Attention, please. Eros Station is in emergency lockdown. Proceed immediately to the casino level for radiological safety confinement. Cooperate with all emergency personnel. Attention, please. Eros station is in emergency lockdown… "

And on in a loop that would continue, if no one coded in the override, until every man, woman, child, animal, and insect on the station had been reduced to dust and humidity. It was the nightmare scenario, and Miller did what a lifetime on pressurized rocks had trained him to do. He was up from the table, in the corridor, and heading down toward the wider passages, already clogged with bodies. Holden and his crew were on his heels.

"That was an explosion," Alex said. "Ship drive at the least. Maybe a nuke."

"They are going to kill the station," Holden said. There was a kind of awe in his voice. "I never thought I'd miss the part where they just blew up the ships I was on. But now it's stations."

"They didn't crack it," Miller said.

"You're sure of that?" Naomi asked.

"I can hear you talking," Miller said. "That tells me there's air."

"There are airlocks," Holden said. "If the station got holed and the locks closed down… "

A woman pushed hard against Miller's shoulder, forcing her way

forward. If they weren't damn careful, there was going to be a stampede. This was too much fear and not enough space. It hadn't happened yet, but the impatient movement of the crowd, vibrating like molecules in water just shy of boiling, made Miller very uncomfortable.

"This isn't a ship," Miller said. "It's a station. This is rock we're on. Anything big enough to get to the parts of the station with atmosphere would crack the place like an egg. A great big pressurized egg."

The crowd was stopped, the tunnel full. They were going to need crowd control, and they were going to need it fast. For the first time since he'd left Ceres, Miller wished he had a badge. Someone pushed into Amos' side, then backed away through the press when the big guy growled.

"Besides," Miller said, "it's a rad hazard. You don't need air loss to kill everyone in the station. Just burn a few quadrillion spare neutrons through the place at C, and there won't be any trouble with the oxygen supply."

"Cheerful fucker," Amos said.

"They build stations inside of rocks for a reason," Naomi said. "Not so easy to force radiation through this many meters of rock."

"I spent a month in a rad shelter once," Alex said as they pushed through the thickening crowd. "Ship I was on had magnetic containment drop. Automatic cutoffs failed, and the reactor kept runnin' for almost a second. Melted the engine room. Killed five of the crew on the next deck up before they knew we had a problem, and it took them three days to carve the bodies free of the melted decking for burial. The rest of us wound up eighteen to a shelter for thirty-six days while a tug flew to get us."

"Sounds great," Holden said.

"End of it, six of 'em got married, and the rest of us never spoke to each other again," Alex said.

Ahead of them, someone shouted. It wasn't in alarm or even anger, really. Frustration. Fear. Exactly the things Miller didn't want to hear.

"That may not be our big problem," Miller said, but before he could explain, a new voice cut in, drowning out the emergency-response loop.

"Okay, everybody! We're Eros security, *que no*? We got an emergency, so you do what we tell you and nobody gets hurt."

About time, Miller thought.

"So here's the rule," the new voice said. "Next asshole who pushes anyone, I'm going to shoot them. Move in an orderly fashion. First priority: orderly. Second priority is *move*! Go, go, go!"

At first nothing happened. The knot of human bodies was tied too tightly for even the most heavy-handed crowd control to free quickly,

but a minute later, Miller saw some heads far ahead of him in the tunnel start to shift, then move away. The air in the tunnel was thickening and the hot plastic smell of overloaded recyclers reached him just as the clot came free. Miller's breath started coming easier.

"Do they have hard shelters?" a woman behind them asked her companion, and then was swept away by the currents. Naomi plucked Miller's sleeve.

"Do they?" she asked.

"They should, yes," Miller said. "Enough for maybe a quarter million, and essential personnel and medical crews would get first crack at them."

"And everyone else?" Amos said.

"If they survive the event," Holden said, "station personnel will save as many people as they can."

"Ah," Amos said. Then: "Well, fuck that. We're going for the *Roci,* right?"

"Oh, hell yes," Holden said.

Ahead of them, the fast-shuffling crowd in their tunnel was merging with another flow of people from a lower level. Five thick-necked men in riot gear were waving people on. Two of them were pointing guns at the crowd. Miller was more than half tempted to go up and slap the little idiots. Pointing guns at people was a lousy way to avoid panic. One of the security men was also far too wide for his gear, the Velcro fasteners at his belly reaching out for each other like lovers at the moment of separation.

Miller looked down at the floor and slowed his steps, the back of his mind suddenly and powerfully busy. One of the cops swung his gun out over the crowd. Another one—the fat guy—laughed and said something in Korean.

What had Sematimba said about the new security force? All bluster, no balls. A new corporation out of Luna. Belters on the ground. Corrupt.

The name. They'd had a name. CPM. *Carne Por la Machina.* Meat for the machine. One of the gun-wielding cops lowered his weapon, swept off his helmet, and scratched violently behind one ear. He had wild black hair, a tattooed neck, and a scar that went from one eyelid down almost to the joint of his jaw.

Miller knew him. A year and a half ago, he'd arrested him for assault and racketeering. And the equipment—armor, batons, riot guns—also looked hauntingly familiar. Dawes had been wrong. Miller had been able to find his own missing equipment after all.

Whatever this was, it had been going on a long time before the *Canterbury* had picked up a distress call from the *Scopuli.* A long time before Julie had vanished. And putting a bunch of Ceres Station thugs

in charge of Eros crowd control using stolen Ceres Station equipment had been part of the plan. The third phase.

Ah, he thought. *Well. That can't be good.*

Miller slid to the side, letting as many bodies as he plausibly could fill the space between him and the gunmen dressed as police.

"Get down to the casino level," one of the gunmen shouted over the crowd. "We'll get you into the radiation shelters from there, but you've got to get to the casino level!"

Holden and his crew hadn't noticed anything odd. They were talking among themselves, strategizing about how to get to their ship and what to do once they got there, speculating about who might have attacked the station and where Julie Mao's twisted, infected corpse might be headed. Miller fought the impulse to interrupt them. He needed to stay calm, to think things through. They couldn't attract attention. He needed the right moment.

The corridor turned and widened. The press of bodies lightened a little bit. Miller waited for a dead zone in the crowd control, a space where none of the fake security men could see them. He took Holden by the elbow.

"Don't go," he said.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Holden

What do you mean, don't go?" Holden asked, yanking his elbow out of Miller's grasp. "Somebody just nuked the station. This has escalated beyond our capacity to respond. If we can't get to the *Roci,* we're doing whatever they tell us to until we can."

Miller took a step back and put up his hands; he was clearly doing his best to look nonthreatening, which just pissed Holden off even more. Behind him, the riot cops were motioning the people milling in the corridors toward the casinos. The air echoed with the electronically amplified voices of the police directing the crowds and the buzz of anxious citizens. Over it all, the public-address system told everyone to remain calm and cooperate with emergency personnel.

"See that bruiser over there in the police riot gear?" Miller said. "His name is Gabby Smalls. He supervises a chunk of the Golden Bough protection racket on Ceres. He also runs a little dust on the side, and I suspect he's tossed more than a few people out airlocks."

Holden looked at the guy. Wide shoulders, thick gut. Now that Miller pointed him out, there was something about him that didn't seem right for a cop.

"I don't get it," Holden said.

"A couple months ago, when you started a bunch of riots by saying Mars blew up your water hauler, we found out—"

"I never said—"

"—*found out* that most of the police riot gear on Ceres was missing. A few months before that, a bunch of our underworld muscle went missing. I just found out where both of them are."

Miller pointed at the riot-gear-equipped Gabby Smalls.

"I wouldn't go wherever he's sending people," he said. "I really wouldn't."

A thin stream of people bumped past.

"Then where?" Naomi asked.

"Yeah, I mean, if the choice is radiation or mobsters, I gotta go with the mobsters," Alex said, nodding emphatically at Naomi.

Miller pulled out his hand terminal and held it up so everyone could see the screen.

"I've got no radiation warnings," he said. "Whatever happened outside isn't a danger on this level. Not right now. So let's just calm down and make the smart move."

Holden turned his back on Miller and motioned to Naomi. He pulled her aside and said in a quiet voice, "I still think we go back to the ship and get out of here. Take our chances getting past these mobsters."

“If there’s no radiation danger, then I agree,” she said with a nod.

“I disagree,” Miller said, not even pretending he hadn’t been eavesdropping. “To do that we have to walk through three levels of casino filled with riot gear and thugs. They’re going to tell us to get in one of those casinos for our own protection. When we don’t, they’ll beat us unconscious and throw us in anyway. For our own protection.”

Another crowd of people poured out of a branch corridor, heading for the reassuring presence of the police and the bright casino lights. Holden found it difficult not to be swept along with the crowd. A man with two enormous suitcases bumped into Naomi, almost knocking her down. Holden grabbed her hand.

“What’s the alternative?” he asked Miller.

Miller glanced up and down the corridor, seeming to measure the flow of people. He nodded at a yellow-and-black-striped hatch down a small maintenance corridor.

“That one,” he said. “It’s marked HIGH VOLTAGE, so the guys sweeping for stragglers won’t bother with it. It’s not the kind of place citizens hide.”

“Can you get that door open quickly?” Holden said, looking at Amos.

“Can I break it?”

“If you need to.”

“Then sure,” Amos said, and began pushing his way through the crowd toward the maintenance hatch. At the door, he pulled out his multi-tool and popped off the cheap plastic housing for the card reader. After he twisted a couple of wires together, the hatch slid open with a hydraulic hiss.

“Ta-da,” Amos said. “The reader won’t work anymore, so anyone who wants in comes in.”

“Let’s worry about that if it happens,” Miller replied, then led them into the dimly lit passageway beyond.

The service corridor was filled with electrical cable held together with plastic ties. It stretched through the dim red light for thirty or forty feet before falling into gloom. The light came from LEDs mounted on the metal bracing that sprouted from the wall every five feet or so to hold the cable up. Naomi had to duck to enter, her frame about four centimeters too tall for the ceiling. She put her back to the wall and slid down onto her haunches.

“You’d think they’d make the maintenance corridors tall enough for Belters to work in,” she said irritably.

Holden touched the wall almost reverently, tracing a corridor identification number carved right into the stone.

“The Belters who built this place weren’t tall,” he said. “These are some of the main power lines. This tunnel goes back to the first Belt

colony. The people who carved it grew up in gravity."

Miller, who also had to duck his head, sat on the floor with a grunt and popping knees.

"History lesson later," he said. "Let's figure a way off this rock."

Amos, studying the bundles of cable intently, said over his shoulder, "If you see a frayed spot, don't touch it. This thick fucker right here is a couple million volts. That'd melt your shit down real good."

Alex sat down next to Naomi, grimacing when his butt hit the cold stone floor.

"You know," he said, "if they decide to seal up the station, they might pump all the air outta these maintenance corridors."

"I get it," Holden said loudly. "It's a shitty and uncomfortable hiding spot. You have my permission to now shut up about that."

He squatted down across the corridor from Miller and said, "Okay, Detective. Now what?"

"Now," Miller said, "we wait for the sweep to pass us by, and get behind it, try to get to the docks. The folks in the shelters are easy to avoid. Shelters are up deep. Trick's going to be getting through the casino levels."

"Can't we just use these maintenance passages to move around?" Alex asked.

Amos shook his head. "Not without a map, we won't. You get lost in here, you're in trouble," he said.

Ignoring them, Holden said, "Okay, so we wait for everyone to move to the radiation shelters and then we leave."

Miller nodded at him, and then the two men sat staring at each other for a moment. The air between them seemed to thicken, the silence taking on a meaning of its own. Miller shrugged like his jacket itched.

"Why do you think a bunch of Ceres mobsters are moving everyone to radiation shelters when there's no actual radiation danger?" Holden finally said. "And why are the Eros cops letting them?"

"Good questions," Miller said.

"If they were using these yahoos, it helps explain why their attempted kidnapping at the hotel went so poorly. They don't seem like pros."

"Nope," Miller said. "That's not their usual area of expertise."

"Would you two be quiet?" Naomi said.

For almost a minute they were.

"It'd be really stupid," Holden said, "to go take a look at what's going on, wouldn't it?"

"Yes. Whatever's going on at those shelters, you know that's where all the guards and patrols will be," Miller said.

"Yeah," Holden said.

“Captain,” Naomi said, a warning in her voice.

“Still,” Holden said, talking to Miller, “you hate a mystery.”

“I do at that,” Miller replied with a nod and a faint smile. “And you, my friend, are a damn busybody.”

“It’s been said.”

“Goddamn it,” Naomi said quietly.

“What is it, Boss?” Amos asked.

“These two just broke our getaway plan,” Naomi replied. Then she said to Holden, “You guys are going to be very bad for each other and, by extension, us.”

“No,” Holden replied. “You aren’t coming along. You stay here with Amos and Alex. Give us”—he looked at his terminal—“three hours to go look and come back. If we aren’t here—”

“We leave you to the gangsters and the three of us get jobs on Tycho and live happily ever after,” Naomi said.

“Yeah,” Holden said with a grin. “Don’t be a hero.”

“Wouldn’t even consider it, sir.”

Holden crouched in the shadows outside the maintenance hatch and watched as Ceres mobsters dressed in police riot gear led the citizens of Eros away in small groups. The PA system continued to declare the possibility of radiological danger and exhorted the citizens and guests of Eros to cooperate fully with emergency personnel. Holden had selected a group to follow and was getting ready to move when Miller placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Wait,” Miller said. “I want to make a call.”

He quickly dialed up a number on his hand terminal, and after a few moments, a flat gray *Network Not Available* message appeared.

“Phone is down?” Holden asked.

“That’s the first thing I’d do, too,” Miller replied.

“I see,” Holden said even though he really didn’t.

“Well, I guess it’s just you and me,” Miller said, then took the magazine out of his gun and began reloading it with cartridges he pulled out of his coat pocket.

Even though he’d had enough of gunfights to last him the rest of his life, Holden took out his gun and checked the magazine as well. He’d replaced it after the shoot-out in the hotel, and it was full. He racked it and put it back in the waistband of his pants. Miller, he noticed, kept his out, holding it close to his thigh, where his coat mostly

covered it.

It wasn't difficult following the groups up through the station toward the inner sections where the radiation shelters were. As long as they kept moving in the same direction as the crowds, no one gave them a second look. Holden made a mental note of the many corridor intersections where men in riot gear stood guard. It would be much tougher coming back down.

When the group they were following eventually stopped outside a large metal door marked with the ancient radiation symbol, Holden and Miller slipped off to the side and hid behind a large planter filled with ferns and a couple of stunted trees. Holden watched the fake riot cops order everyone into the shelter and then seal the door behind them with the swipe of a card. All but one of them left, the remaining one standing guard outside the door.

Miller whispered, "Let's ask him to let us in."

"Follow my lead," Holden replied, then stood up and began walking toward the guard.

"Hey, shithead, you supposed to be in a shelter or in the casino, so get the fuck back to your group," the guard said, his hand on the butt of his gun.

Holden held up his hands placatingly, smiled, and kept walking. "Hey, I lost my group. Got mixed up somehow. I'm not from here, you know," he said.

The guard pointed down the corridor with the stun baton in his left hand.

"Go that way till you hit the ramps down," he said.

Miller seemed to appear out of nowhere in the dimly lit corridor, his gun already out and pointed at the guard's head. He thumbed off the safety with an audible click.

"How about we just join the group already inside?" he said. "Open it up."

The guard looked at Miller out of the corners of his eyes, not turning his head at all. His hands went up, and he dropped the baton.

"You don't want to do that, man," the fake cop said.

"I kind of think he does," Holden said. "You should do what he says. He's not a very nice person."

Miller pushed the barrel of his gun against the guard's head and said, "You know what we used to call a 'no-brainer' back at the station house? It's when a shot to the head actually blows the entire brain out of someone's skull. It usually happens when a gun is pressed to the victim's head right about here. The gas's got nowhere to go. Pops the brain right out through the exit wound."

"They said not to open these up once they'd been sealed, man," the guard said, speaking so fast he ran all the words together. "They were

pretty serious about that."

"This is the last time I ask," Miller said. "Next time I just use the card I took off your body."

Holden turned the guard around to face the door and pulled the handgun out of the man's belt holster. He hoped all Miller's threats were just threats. He suspected they weren't.

"Just open the door, and we'll let you go, I promise," Holden said to the guard.

The guard nodded and moved up to the door, then slid his card through it and punched in a number on the keypad. The heavy blast door slid open. Beyond it, the room was even darker than the corridor outside. A few emergency LEDs glowed a sullen red. In the faint illumination, Holden could see dozens… *hundreds* of bodies scattered across the floor, unmoving.

"Are they dead?" Holden asked.

"I don't know nothing about—" the guard said, but Miller cut him off.

"You go in first," Miller said, and pushed the guard forward.

"Hold on," Holden said. "I don't think it's a good idea to just charge in here."

Three things happened at once. The guard took four steps forward and then collapsed on the floor. Miller sneezed once, loudly, and then started to sway drunkenly. And both Holden's and Miller's hand terminals began an angry electric buzzing.

Miller staggered back and said, "The door… "

Holden hit the button and the door slid shut again.

"Gas," Miller said, then coughed. "There's gas in there."

While the ex-cop leaned against the corridor wall and coughed, Holden took out his terminal to shut off the buzzing. But the alarm flashing on its screen wasn't an air-contamination alert. It was the venerable three wedge shapes pointing inward. Radiation. As he watched, the symbol, which should have been white, shifted through an angry orange color to dark red.

Miller was looking at his too, his expression unreadable.

"We've been dosed," Holden said.

"I've never actually seen the detector activate," Miller said, his voice rough and faint after his coughing fit. "What does it mean when the thing is red?"

"It means we'll be bleeding from our rectums in about six hours," Holden said. "We have to get to the ship. It'll have the meds we need."

"What," Miller said, "the *fuck*… is going on?"

Holden grabbed Miller by the arm and led him back down the corridor toward the ramps. Holden's skin felt warm and itchy. He didn't know if it was radiation burn or psychosomatic. With the

amount of radiation he'd just taken, it was a good thing he had sperm tucked away in Montana and on Europa.

Thinking that made his balls itch.

"They nuke the station," Holden said. "Hell, maybe they just *pretend* to nuke it. Then they drag everyone down here and toss them into radiation shelters that are only radioactive on the inside. Gas them to keep them quiet."

"There are easier ways to kill people," Miller said, his breathing coming in ragged gasps as they ran down the corridor.

"So it has to be more than that," Holden said. "The bug, right? The one that killed that girl. It… fed on radiation."

"Incubators," Miller said, nodding in agreement.

They arrived at one of the ramps to the lower levels, but a group of citizens led by two fake riot cops were coming up. Holden grabbed Miller and pulled him to one side, where they could hide in the shadow of a closed noodle shop.

"So they infected them, right?" Holden said in a whisper, waiting for the group to pass. "Maybe fake radiation meds with the bug in it. Maybe that brown goo just spread around on the floor. Then whatever was in the girl, Julie—"

He stopped when Miller walked away from him straight at the group that had just come up the ramp.

"Officer," said Miller to one of the fake cops.

They both stopped, and one of them said, "You supposed to be—"

Miller shot him in the throat, right below his helmet's faceplate. Then he swiveled smoothly and shot the other guard in the inside of the thigh, just below the groin. When the man fell backward, yelling in pain, Miller walked up and shot him again, this time in the neck.

A couple of the citizens started screaming. Miller pointed his gun at them and they got quiet.

"Go down a level or two and find someplace to hide," he said. "Do not cooperate with these men, even though they're dressed like police. They do not have your best interests at heart. Go."

The citizens hesitated, then ran. Miller took a few cartridges out of his pocket and began replacing the three he'd fired. Holden started to speak, but Miller cut him off.

"Take the throat shot if you can. Most people, the faceplate and chest armor don't quite cover that gap. If the neck is covered, then shoot the inside of the thigh. Very thin armor there. Mobility issue. Takes most people down in one shot."

Holden nodded, as though that all made sense.

"Okay," Holden said. "Say, let's get back to the ship before we bleed to death, right? No more shooting people if we can help it." His voice sounded calmer than he felt.

Miller slapped the magazine back into his gun and chambered a round.

“I’m guessing there’s a lot more people need to be shot before this is over,” he said. “But sure. First things first.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Miller

The first time Miller killed anyone was in his third year working security. He'd been twenty-two, just married, talking about having kids. As the new guy on the contract, he'd gotten the shit jobs: patrolling levels so high the Coriolis made him seasick, taking domestic disturbance calls in holes no wider than a storage bin, standing guard on the drunk tank to keep predators from raping the unconscious. The normal hazing. He'd known to expect it. He'd thought he could take it.

The call had been from an illegal restaurant almost at the mass center. At less than a tenth of a g, gravity had been little more than a suggestion, and his inner ear had been confused and angered by the change in spin. If he thought about it, he could still remember the sound of raised voices, too fast and slurred for words. The smell of bathtub cheese. The thin haze of smoke from the cheap electric griddle.

It had happened fast. The perp had come out of the hole with a gun in one hand, dragging a woman by the hair with the other. Miller's partner, a ten-year veteran named Carson, had shouted out the warning. The perp had turned, swinging the gun out at arm's length like a stuntman in a video.

All through training, the instructors had said that you couldn't know what you'd do until the moment came. Killing another human being was hard. Some people couldn't. The perp's gun came around; the gunman dropped the woman and shouted. It turned out that, for Miller at least, it wasn't all that hard.

Afterward, he'd been through mandatory counseling. He'd cried. He'd suffered the nightmares and the shakes and all the things that cops suffered quietly and didn't talk about. But even then, it seemed to be happening at a distance, like he'd gotten too drunk and was watching himself throw up. It was just a physical reaction. It would pass.

The important thing was he knew the answer to the question. Yes, if he needed to, he could take a life.

It wasn't until now, walking through the corridors of Eros, that he'd taken joy in it. Even taking down the poor bastard in that first firefight had felt like the sad necessity of work. Pleasure in killing hadn't come until after Julie, and it wasn't really pleasure as much as a brief cessation of pain.

He held the gun low. Holden started down the ramp, and Miller followed, letting the Earther take point. Holden walked faster than he

did and with the uncommented athleticism of someone who lived in a wide variety of gravities. Miller had the feeling he'd made Holden nervous, and he regretted that a little. He hadn't intended to, and he really needed to get aboard Holden's ship if he was going to find Julie's secrets.

Or, for that matter, not die of radiation sickness in the next few hours. That seemed a finer point than it probably was.

"Okay," Holden said at the bottom of the ramp. "We need to get back down, and there are a lot of guards between us and Naomi that are going to be really confused by two guys walking the wrong direction."

"That's a problem," Miller agreed.

"Any thoughts?"

Miller frowned and considered the flooring. The Eros floors were different than Ceres'. Laminate with flecks of gold.

"Tubes aren't going to be running," he said. "If they are, it'll be in lockdown mode, where it only stops at the holding pen down in the casino. So that's out."

"Maintenance corridor again?"

"If we can find one that goes between levels," Miller said. "Might be a little tricky, but it seems like a better bet than shooting our way past a couple dozen assholes in armor. How long have we got before your friend takes off?"

Holden looked at his hand terminal. The radiation alarm was still deep red. Miller wondered how long those took to reset.

"A little more than two hours," Holden said. "Shouldn't be a problem."

"Let's see what we can find," Miller said.

The corridors nearest the radiation shelters—the death traps, the incubators—had been emptied. Wide passages built to accommodate the ancient construction equipment that had carved Eros into a human habitation were eerie with only Holden's and Miller's footsteps and the hum of the air recyclers. Miller hadn't noticed when the emergency announcements had stopped, but the absence of them now seemed ominous.

If it had been Ceres, he would have known where to go, where everything led, how to move gracefully from one stage to another. On Eros, all he had was an educated guess. That wasn't so bad.

But he could tell it was taking too long, and worse than that—they weren't talking about it; neither one spoke—they were walking more slowly than normal. It wasn't up to the threshold of consciousness, but Miller knew that both of their bodies were starting to feel the radiation damage. It wasn't going to get better.

"Okay," Holden said. "Somewhere around here there has to be a

maintenance shaft."

"Could also try the tube station," Miller said. "The cars run in vacuum, but there might be some service tunnels running parallel."

"Don't you think they'd have shut those down as part of the big roundup?"

"Probably," Miller said.

"Hey! You two! What the fuck you think you're doing up here?"

Miller looked back over his shoulder. Two men in riot gear were waving at them menacingly. Holden said something sharp under his breath. Miller narrowed his eyes.

The thing was these men were amateurs. The beginning of an idea moved in the back of Miller's mind as he watched the two approach. Killing them and taking their gear wouldn't work. There was nothing like scorch marks and blood to make it clear something had happened. But…

"Miller," Holden said, a warning in his voice.

"Yeah," Miller said. "I know."

"I said what the fuck are you two doing here?" one of the security men said. "The station's on lockdown. Everyone goes down to the casino level or up to the radiation shelters."

"We were just looking for a way to… ah… get down to the casino level," Holden said, smiling and being nonthreatening. "We're not from around here, and—"

The closer of the two guards jabbed the butt of his rifle neatly into Holden's leg. The Earther staggered, and Miller shot the guard just below the faceplate, then turned to the one still standing, mouth agape.

"You're Mikey Ko, right?" Miller said.

The man's face went even paler, but he nodded. Holden groaned and stood.

"Detective Miller," Miller said. "Busted you on Ceres about four years ago. You got a little happy in a bar. Tappan's, I think? Hit a girl with a pool cue?"

"Oh, hey," the man said with a frightened smile. "Yeah, I remember you. How you been doing?"

"Good and bad," Miller said. "You know how it is. Give the Earther your gun."

Ko looked from Miller to Holden and back, licking his lips and judging his chances. Miller shook his head.

"Seriously," Miller said. "Give him the gun."

"Sure, yeah. No problem."

This was the kind of man who'd killed Julie, Miller thought. Stupid. Shortsighted. A man born with a sense for raw opportunity where his soul should have been. Miller's mental Julie shook her head in disgust

and sorrow, and Miller found himself wondering if she meant the thug now handing his rifle to Holden or himself. Maybe both.

"What's the deal here, Mikey?" Miller asked.

"What do you mean?" the guard said, playing stupid, like they were in an interrogation cell. Stalling for time. Walking through the old script of cop and criminal as if it still made sense. As if everything hadn't changed. Miller was surprised by a tightness in his throat. He didn't know what it was there for.

"The job," he said. "What's the job?"

"I don't know—"

"Hey," Miller said gently. "I just killed your buddy."

"And that's his third today," Holden said. "I saw him."

Miller could see it in the man's eyes: the cunning, the shift, the move from one strategy to another. It was old and familiar and as predictable as water moving down.

"Hey," Ko said, "it's just a job. They told us about a year ago how we were making a big move, right? But no one knows what it is. So a few months back, they start moving guys over. Training us up like we were cops, you know?"

"Who was training you?" Miller said.

"The last guys. The ones who were working the contract before us," Ko said.

"Protogen?"

"Something like that, yeah," he said. "Then they took off, and we took over. Just muscle, you know. Some smuggling."

"Smuggling what?"

"All kinds of shit," Ko said. He was starting to feel safe, and it showed in the way he held himself and the way he spoke. "Surveillance equipment, communication arrays, serious-as-fuck servers with their own little gel software wonks already built in. Scientific equipment too. Stuff for checking the water and the air and shit. And these ancient remote-access robots like you'd use in a vacuum dig. All sorts of shit."

"Where was it going to?" Holden asked.

"Here," Ko said, gesturing to the air, the stone, the station. "It's all here. They were like months installing it all. And then for weeks, nothing."

"What do you mean, nothing?" Miller asked.

"Nothing nothing. All this buildup and then we sat around with our thumbs up our butts."

Something had gone wrong. The Phoebe bug hadn't made its rendezvous, but then Julie had come, Miller thought, and the game had turned back on. He saw her again as if he were in her apartment. The long, spreading tendrils of whatever the hell it was, the bone

spurs pressing out against her skin, the black froth of filament pouring from her eyes.

"The pay's good, though," Ko said philosophically. "And it was kind of nice taking some time off."

Miller nodded in agreement, leaned close, tucking the barrel of his gun through the interleaving of armor at Ko's belly, and shot him.

"What the fuck!" Holden said as Miller put his gun into his jacket pocket.

"What did you think was going to happen?" Miller said, squatting down beside the gut-shot man. "It's not like he was going to let us go."

"Yeah, okay," Holden said. "But… "

"Help me get him up," Miller said, hooking an arm behind Ko's shoulder. Ko shrieked when Miller lifted him.

"What?"

"Get his other side," Miller said. "Man needs medical attention, right?"

"Um. Yes," Holden said.

"So get his other side."

It wasn't as far back to the radiation shelters as Miller had expected, which had its good points and its bad ones. On the upside, Ko was still alive and screaming. The chances were better that he'd be lucid, which wasn't what Miller had intended. But as they came near the first group of guards, Ko's babbling seemed scattered enough to work.

"Hey!" Miller shouted. "Some help over here!"

At the head of the ramp, four of the guards looked at one another and then started moving toward them, curiosity winning out over basic operating procedures. Holden was breathing hard. Miller was too. Ko wasn't that heavy. It was a bad sign.

"What the hell is this?" one of the guards said.

"There's a bunch of people holed up back there," Miller said. "Resistance. I thought you people swept this level."

"That wasn't our job," the guy said. "We're just making sure the groups from the casino get to the shelters."

"Well, someone screwed up," Miller snapped. "You have transport?"

The guards looked at each other again.

"We can call for one," a guy at the back said.

"Never mind," Miller said. "You boys go find the shooters."

"Wait a minute," the first guy said. "Exactly who the hell are you?"

"The installers from Protogen," Holden said. "We're replacing the sensors that failed. This guy was supposed to help us."

"I didn't hear about that," the leader said.

Miller dug a finger under Ko's armor and squeezed. Ko shrieked and tried to writhe away from him.

"Talk to your boss about it on your own time," Miller said. "Come

on. Let's get this asshole to a medic."

"Hold on!" the first guard said, and Miller sighed. Four of them. If he dropped Ko and jumped for cover… but there wasn't much cover. And who the hell knew what Holden would do?

"Where are the shooters?" the guard asked. Miller kept himself from smiling.

"There's a hole about a quarter klick anti-spinward," Miller said. "The other one's body's still there. You can't miss it."

Miller turned down the ramp. Behind him, the guards were talking among themselves, debating what to do, who to call, who to send.

"You're completely insane," Holden said over Ko's semiconscious weeping.

Maybe he was right.

When, Miller wondered, *does someone stop being human?* There had to be a moment, some decision that you made, and before it, you were one person, and after it, someone else. Walking down through the levels of Eros, Ko's bleeding body slung between him and Holden, Miller reflected. He was probably dying of radiation damage. He was lying his way past half a dozen men who were only letting him by because they were used to people being scared of them and he wasn't. He had killed three people in the last two hours. Four if he counted Ko. Probably safer to say four, then.

The analytical part of his mind, the small, still voice he had cultivated for years, watched him move and replayed all his decisions. Everything he'd done had made perfect sense at the time. Shooting Ko. Shooting the other three. Leaving the safety of the crew's hideout to investigate the evacuation. Emotionally, it had all been obvious at the time. It was only when he considered it from outside that it seemed dangerous. If he'd seen it in someone else—Muss, Havelock, Sematimba—he wouldn't have taken more than a minute to realize they'd gone off the rails. Since it was him, he had taken longer to notice. But Holden was right. Somewhere along the line, he'd lost himself.

He wanted to think it had been finding Julie, seeing what had happened to her body, knowing he hadn't been able to save her, but that was only because it seemed like the sentimental moment. The truth was his decisions before then—leaving Ceres to go on a wild hunt for Julie, drinking himself out of a career, remaining a cop for

even a day after that first kill all those years earlier—none of them seemed to make sense, viewed objectively. He'd lost a marriage to a woman he'd loved once. He'd lived hip deep in the worst humanity had to offer. He'd learned firsthand that he was capable of killing another human being. And nowhere along the line could he say that there, at that moment, he had been a sane, whole man, and that afterward, he hadn't.

Maybe it was a cumulative process, like smoking cigarettes. One didn't do much. Five didn't do much more. Every emotion he'd shut down, every human contact he'd spurned, every love and friendship and moment of compassion from which he'd turned had taken him a degree away from himself. Until now, he'd been able to kill men with impunity. To face his impending death with a denial that let him make plans and take action.

In his mind, Julie Mao tilted her head, listening to his thoughts. In his mind, she held him, her body against his in a way that was more comforting than erotic. Consoling. Forgiving.

This was why he had searched for her. Julie had become the part of him that was capable of human feeling. The symbol of what he could have been if he hadn't been this. There was no reason to think his imagined Julie had anything in common with the real woman. Meeting her would have been a disappointment for them both.

He had to believe that, the same way he'd had to believe everything that had cut him off from love before.

Holden stopped, the body—corpse now—of Ko tugging Miller back to himself.

"What?" Miller said.

Holden nodded at the access panel in front of them. Miller looked at it, uncomprehending, and then recognized it. They'd made it. They were back at the hideout.

"Are you all right?" Holden said.

"Yeah," Miller said. "Just woolgathering. Sorry."

He dropped Ko, and the thug slid to the floor with a sad thud. Miller's arm had fallen asleep. He shook it, but the tingling didn't go away. A wave of vertigo and nausea passed through him. *Symptoms,* he thought.

"How'd we do for time?" Miller asked.

"We're a little past deadline. Five minutes. It'll be fine," Holden said, and slid the door open.

The space beyond, where Naomi and Alex and Amos had been, was empty.

"Fuck me," Holden said.

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Holden

Fuck me," Holden said. And a moment later: "They left us."

No. *She* had left *him*. Naomi had said she would, but confronted with the reality of it, Holden realized that he hadn't really believed her. But here it was—the proof. The empty space where she used to be. His heart hammered and his throat tightened, breath coming in gasps. The sick feeling in his gut was either despair or his colon sloughing off its lining. He was going to die sitting outside a cheap hotel on Eros because Naomi had done exactly what she'd said she would. What he himself had ordered her to do. His resentment refused to listen to reason.

"We're dead," he said, and sat down on the edge of a fern-filled planter.

"How long do we have?" Miller asked, looking up and down the corridor while he fidgeted with his gun.

"No idea," Holden replied, gesturing vaguely at his terminal's flashing red radiation symbol. "Hours before we really start to feel it, I think, but I don't know. God, I wish Shed was still here."

"Shed?"

"Friend of mine," Holden said, not feeling up to elaborating. "Good med tech."

"Call her," Miller said.

Holden looked at his terminal and tapped the screen a few times.

"Network's still down," he said.

"All right," Miller said. "Let's go to your ship. See if it's still in dock."

"They'll be gone. Naomi's keeping the crew alive. She warned me, but I—"

"So let's go anyway," Miller said. He was shifting from one foot to the other and looking down the corridor as he spoke.

"Miller," Holden said, then stopped. Miller was clearly on edge, and he'd shot four people. Holden was increasingly frightened of the former cop. As if reading his mind, Miller stepped close, the two-meter man towering over him where he sat. Miller smiled ruefully, his eyes unnervingly gentle. Holden would almost have preferred they be threatening.

"Way I see it, there's three ways this can go," Miller said. "One, we find your ship still in dock, get the meds we need, and maybe we live. Two, we try to get to the ship, and along the way we run into a bunch of mafia thugs. Die gloriously in a hail of bullets. Three, we sit here and leak out of our eyes and assholes."

Holden said nothing; he just stared up at the cop and frowned.

"I'm liking the first two better than the last one," Miller said. His voice made it sound like an apology. "How about you come with?"

Holden laughed before he could catch himself, but Miller didn't look like he was taking offense.

"Sure," Holden said. "I just needed to feel sorry for myself for a minute. Let's go get killed by the mafia."

He said it with much more bravado than he felt. The truth was he didn't want to die. Even during his time in the navy, the idea of dying in the line of duty had always seemed distant and unreal. *His* ship would never be destroyed, and if it was, *he* would make it to the escape shuttle. The universe without him in it didn't make any sense at all. He'd taken risks; he'd seen other people die. Even people he loved. Now, for the first time, his own death was a real thing.

He looked at the cop. He'd known the man less than a day, didn't trust him, and wasn't sure he much liked him. And this was who he'd die with. Holden shuddered and stood up, pulling his gun out of his waistband. Under the panic and fear, there was a deep feeling of calm. He hoped it would last.

"After you," Holden said. "If we make it, remind me to call my mothers."

The casinos were a powder keg waiting for a match. If the evacuation sweeps had been even moderately successful, there were probably a million or more people crammed into three levels of the station. Hard-looking men in riot gear moved through the crowds, telling everyone to stay put until they were taken to the radiation shelters, keeping the crowd frightened. Every now and then, a small group of citizens would be led away. Knowing where they were going made Holden's stomach burn. He wanted to yell out that cops were fake, that they were killing people. But a riot with this many people in such a confined space would be a meat grinder. Maybe that was inevitable but he wasn't going to be the one to start it.

Someone else did.

Holden could hear raised voices, the angry rumble of the mob, followed by the electronically amplified voice of someone in a riot helmet yelling for people to get back. And then a gunshot, a brief pause, then a fusillade. People screamed. The entire crowd around Holden and Miller surged in two opposing directions, some of the

people rushing toward the sound of the conflict, but many more of them running away from it. Holden spun in the current of bodies; Miller reached out and grabbed the back of his shirt, gripping it in his fist and yelling for Holden to stay close.

About a dozen meters down the corridor, in a coffee shop seating area separated by a waist-high black iron fence, one of the mafia thugs had been cut off from his group by a dozen citizens. Gun drawn, he was backing up and yelling at them to move aside. They kept advancing, their faces wild with the drunken frenzy of mob violence.

The mafia thug fired once, and one small body staggered forward, then fell to the ground at the thug's feet. Holden couldn't tell if it was a boy or a girl, but they couldn't be more than thirteen or fourteen years old. The thug moved forward, looking down at the small thin figure at his feet, and pointed his gun at them again.

It was too much.

Holden found himself running down the corridor toward the thug, gun drawn and screaming for people to get out of the way. When he was about seven meters away, the crowd split apart enough for him to begin firing. Half his shots went wild, hitting the coffee shop counter and walls, one round blowing a stack of ceramic plates into the air. But a few of them hit the thug, staggering him back.

Holden vaulted the waist-high metal fence and came to a sliding halt about three meters from the fake cop and his victim. Holden's gun fired one last time and then the slide locked in the open position to let him know it was empty.

The thug didn't fall down. He straightened up, looked down at his torso, and then looked up and pointed his gun at Holden's face. Holden had time to count the three bullets that were smashed against the heavy chest armor of the thug's riot gear. *Die gloriously in a hail of bullets,* he thought.

The thug said, "Stupid mother fu—" and his head snapped back in a spray of red. He slumped to the floor.

"Gap at the neck, remember?" Miller said from behind him. "Chest armor's too thick for a pistol."

Suddenly dizzy, Holden bent over at the waist, gasping for air. He tasted lemon at the back of his throat and swallowed twice to stop himself from throwing up. He was afraid it would be full of blood and stomach lining. He didn't need to see that.

"Thanks," he gasped out, turning his head toward Miller.

Miller just nodded vaguely in his direction, then walked over to the guard and nudged him with one foot. Holden stood up and looked around the corridor, waiting for the inevitable wave of vengeful mafia enforcers to come crashing down on them. He didn't see any. He and Miller were standing in a quiet island of calm in the midst of

Armageddon. All around them, tendrils of violence were whipping into high gear. People were running in every direction; the mafia goons were yelling in booming amplified voices and punctuating the threats with periodic gunfire. But there were only hundreds of them, and there were many thousands of angry and panicked civilians. Miller gestured at the chaos.

"This is what happens," he said. "Give a bunch of yahoos the equipment, and they think they know what they're doing."

Holden crouched beside the fallen child. It was a boy, maybe thirteen, with Asian features and dark hair. His chest had a gaping wound in it, blood trickling out instead of gushing. He didn't have a pulse that Holden could find. Holden picked him up anyway, looking around for someplace to take him.

"He's dead," Miller said as he replaced the cartridge he'd fired.

"Go to hell. We don't know. If we can get him to the ship, maybe… "

Miller shook his head, a sad but distant expression on his face as he looked at the child in Holden's arms.

"He took high-caliber round to the center of mass," Miller said. "He's gone."

"Fuck me," Holden said.

"You keep saying that."

A bright neon sign flashed above the corridor that led out of the casino levels and onto the ramps down to the docks. THANK YOU FOR PLAYING, it read. And YOU'RE ALWAYS A WINNER ON EROS. Below it, two ranks of men in heavy combat armor blocked the way. They might have given up on crowd control in the casinos, but they weren't letting anyone go.

Holden and Miller crouched behind an overturned coffee cart a hundred meters from the soldiers. As they watched, a dozen or so people made a dash toward the guards and were summarily mowed down by machine gun fire, then fell to the deck beside those who had tried before.

"I count thirty-four of them," Miller said. "How many can you handle?"

Holden spun to look at him in surprise, but Miller's face told him the former cop was joking.

"Kidding aside, how *do* we get past that?" Holden said.

“Thirty men with machine guns and a clear line of sight. No cover to speak of for the last twenty meters or so,” Miller said. “We don’t get past that.”

Chapter Thirty: Miller

They sat on the floor with their backs to a bank of pachinko machines no one was playing, watching the ebb and flow of the violence around them like it was a soccer game. Miller's hat was perched on his bent knee. He felt the vibration against his back when one of the displays cycled through its dupe-call. The lights glittered and glowed. Holden, beside him, was breathing hard, like he'd run a race. Out beyond them, like something from Hieronymous Bosch, the casino levels of Eros prepared for death.

The riot's momentum had spent itself for now. Men and women gathered together in small groups. Guards strode through, threatening and scattering any bunch that got too large or unruly. Something was burning fast enough that the air scrubbers couldn't get out the smell of melting plastic. The bhangra Muzak mixed with weeping and screaming and wails of despair. Some idiot was shouting at one of the so-called cops: he was a lawyer; he was getting all of this on video; whoever was responsible was going to be in big trouble. Miller watched a bunch of people start to gather around the confrontation. The guy in the riot gear listened, nodded, and shot the lawyer once in the kneecap. The crowd dispersed except for one woman, the lawyer's wife or girlfriend, bent down over him screaming. And in the privacy of Miller's skull, everything slowly fell apart.

He was aware of having two different minds. One was the Miller he was used to, familiar with. The one who was thinking about what was going to happen when he got out, what the next step would be in connecting the dots between Phoebe Station, Ceres, Eros, and Juliette Mao, how to work the case. That version of him was scanning the crowd the way he might have watched the line at a crime scene, waiting for some detail, some change to catch his attention. Send him in the right direction to solve the mystery. It was the shortsighted, idiotic part of him that couldn't conceive of his own personal extinction, and it thought surely, *surely* there was going to be an after.

The other Miller was different. Quieter. Sad, maybe, but at peace. He'd read a poem many years before called "The Death-Self," and he hadn't understood the term until now. A knot at the middle of his psyche was untying. All the energy he'd put into holding things together—Ceres, his marriage, his career, himself—was coming free. He'd shot and killed more men in the past day than in his whole career as a cop. He'd started—only started—to realize that he'd actually fallen in love with the object of his search after he knew for certain that he'd lost her. He'd seen unequivocally that the chaos he'd

dedicated his life to holding at bay was stronger and wider and more powerful than he would ever be. No compromise he could make would be enough. His death-self was unfolding in him, and the dark blooming took no effort. It was a relief, a relaxation, a long, slow exhale after decades of holding it in.

He was in ruins, but it was okay, because he was dying.

"Hey," Holden said. His voice was stronger than Miller had expected it might be.

"Yeah?"

"Did you ever watch *Misko and Marisko* when you were a kid?"

Miller frowned. "The kids' show?" he asked.

"The one with the five dinosaurs and the evil guy in the big pink hat," Holden said, then starting humming a bright, boppy tune. Miller closed his eyes and then started singing along. The music had had words once. Now it was only a series of rises and falls, runs up and down a major scale, with every dissonance resolved in the note that followed.

"Guess I must have," Miller said when they reached the end.

"I loved that show. I must have been eight or nine last time I saw it," Holden said. "Funny how that stuff stays with you."

"Yeah," Miller said. He coughed, turned his head, and spat out something red. "How are you holding together?"

"I think I'm okay," Holden said. Then, a moment later, he added, "As long as I don't stand up."

"Nauseated?"

"Yeah, some."

"Me too."

"What is this?" Holden asked. "I mean, what the hell is this all about? Why are they *doing* this?"

It was a fair question. Slaughtering Eros—slaughtering any station in the Belt—was a pretty easy job. Anyone with first-year orbital mechanics skills could find a way to sling a rock big enough and fast enough to crack the station open. With the effort Protogen had put in, they could have killed the air supply or drugged it or whatever the hell they wanted to do. This wasn't a murder. This wasn't even a genocide.

And then there was all the observation equipment. Cameras, communications arrays, air and water sensors. There were only two reasons for that kind of shit. Either the mad bastards at Protogen got off on watching people die, or…

"They don't know," Miller said.

"What?"

He turned to look at Holden. The first Miller, the detective, the optimist, the one who needed to know, was driving now. His death-

self didn't fight, because of course it didn't. It didn't fight anything. Miller raised his hand, like he was giving a lecture to a rookie.

"They don't know what it's about, or… you know, at least they don't know what's going to happen. This isn't even built like a torture chamber. It's all being watched, right? Water and air sensors. It's a petri dish. They don't know what that shit that killed Julie does, and this is how they're finding out."

Holden frowned.

"Don't they have laboratories? Places where you could maybe put that crap on some animals or something? Because as experimental design goes, this seems a little messed up."

"Maybe they need a really big sample size," Miller said. "Or maybe it's not about the people. Maybe it's about what happens to the station."

"There's a cheery thought," Holden said.

The Julie Mao in Miller's mind brushed a lock of hair out of her eyes. She was frowning, looking thoughtful, interested, concerned. It all had to make sense. It was like one of those basic orbital mechanics problems where every hitch and veer seemed random until all the variables slipped into place. What had been inexplicable became inevitable. Julie smiled at him. Julie as she had been. As he imagined she had been. The Miller who hadn't resigned himself to death smiled back. And then she was gone, his mind shifting to the noise from the pachinko machines and the low, demonic wailing of the crowds.

Another group—twenty men hunkered low, like linebackers—made a rush toward the mercenaries guarding the opening to the port. The gunmen mowed them down.

"If we had enough people," Holden said after the sound of machine guns fell away, "we could make it. They couldn't kill all of us."

"That's what the patrol goons are for," Miller said. "Make sure no one can organize a big enough push. Keep stirring the pot."

"But if it was a mob, I mean a really big mob, it could… "

"Maybe," Miller agreed. Something in his chest clicked in a way it hadn't a minute before. He took a slow, deep breath, and the click happened again. He could feel it deep in his left lung.

"At least Naomi got away," Holden said.

"That is good."

"She's amazing. She'd never put Amos and Alex in danger if she could help it. I mean, she's serious. Professional. Strong, you know? I mean, she's really, really… "

"Pretty, too," Miller said. "Great hair. Love the eyes."

"No, that wasn't what I meant," Holden said.

"You don't think she's a good-looking woman?"

"She's my XO," Holden said. "She's… you know… "

“Off-limits.”

Holden sighed.

“She got away, didn’t she?” Holden asked.

“Almost for sure.”

They were silent. One of the linebackers coughed, stood up, and limped back into the casino, trailing blood from a hole in his ribs. The bhangra gave way to an afropop medley with a low, sultry voice singing in languages Miller didn’t know.

“She’d wait for us,” Holden said. “Don’t you think she’d wait for us?”

“Almost for sure,” Miller’s death-self said, not particularly caring if it was a lie. He thought about it for a long moment, then turned to face Holden again. “Hey. Just so you know it? I’m not exactly at my best right now.”

“Okay.”

“All right.”

The glowing orange lockdown lights on the tube station across the level clicked to green. Miller sat forward, interested. His back felt sticky, but it was probably just sweat. Other people had noticed the change too. Like a current in a water tank, the attention of the nearby crowds shifted from the mercenaries blocking the way to the port to the brushed-steel doors of the tube station.

The doors opened, and the first zombies appeared. Men and women, their eyes glassy and their muscles slack, stumbled out through the open doors. Miller had seen a documentary feed about hemorrhagic fevers as part of his training on Ceres Station. Their movements were the same: listless, driven, autonomic. Like rabid dogs whose minds had already been given over to their disease.

“Hey,” Miller said, his hand on Holden’s shoulder. “Hey, it’s happening.”

An older man in a pair of emergency services scrubs approached the shambling newcomers. His hands were out before him, as if he could corral them by simple force of will. The first zombie in the pack turned empty eyes toward him and vomited up a spray of very familiar brown goo.

“Look,” Holden said.

“I saw.”

“No, *look!*”

All down the casino level, tube station lights were going off lockdown. Doors were opening. The people were pulsing toward the open tubes and the implicit, empty promise of escape, and away from the dead men and women walking out from them.

“Vomit zombies,” Miller said.

“From the rad shelters,” Holden said. “The thing, the organism. It

goes faster in radiation, right? That's why what's-her-name was so freaky about the lights and the vac suit."

"Her name's Julie. And yeah. Those incubators were for this. Right here," Miller said, and sighed. He thought about standing up. "Well. We may not die of radiation poisoning after all."

"Why not just pump that shit into the air?" Holden asked.

"Anaerobic, remember?" Miller said. "Too much oxygen kills 'em."

The vomit-covered emergency medicine guy was still trying to treat the shambling zombies like they were patients. Like they were still humans. There were smears of the brown goo on people's clothes, on the walls. The tube doors opened again, and Miller saw half a dozen people dodge into a tube car coated in brown. The mob churned, unsure what to do, the group mind stretched past its breaking point.

A riot cop jumped forward and started spraying down the zombies with gunfire. The entrance and exit wounds spilled out fine loops of black filament, and the zombies went down. Miller chuckled even before he knew what was funny. Holden looked at him.

"They didn't know," Miller said. "The bully boys in riot gear? They aren't gonna get pulled out. Meat for the machine, just like the rest of us."

Holden made a small approving sound. Miller nodded, but something was niggling at the back of his mind. The thugs from Ceres in their stolen armor were being sacrificed. That didn't mean everyone was. He leaned forward.

The archway leading to the port was still manned. Mercenary fighters in formation, guns at the ready. If anything, they looked more disciplined now than they had before. Miller watched as the guy in the back with extra insignia on his armor barked into a mic.

Miller had thought hope was dead. He'd thought all his chances had been played, and then, like a bitch, it all hauled itself up out of the grave.

"Get up," Miller said.

"What?"

"Get up. They're going to pull back."

"Who?"

Miller nodded at the mercenaries.

"They knew," he said. "Look at them. They aren't freaking out. They aren't confused. They were waiting for this."

"And you think that means they'll fall back?"

"They aren't going to be hanging out. Stand up."

Almost as if he'd been giving the order to himself, Miller groaned and creaked to his feet. His knees and spine ached badly. The click in his lung was getting worse. His belly made a soft, complicated noise that would have been concerning under different circumstances. As

soon as he started moving, he could feel how far the damage had gone, his skin not yet in pain but in the soft presentiment of it, like the gap between a serious burn and the blisters that followed. If he lived, it was going to hurt.

If he lived, *everything* was going to hurt.

His death-self tugged at him. The sense of release, of relief, of *rest* felt like something precious being lost. Even while the chattering, busy, machinelike mind kept grinding, grinding, grinding forward, the soft, bruised center of Miller's soul urged him to pause, sit back down, let the problems go away.

"What are we looking for?" Holden said. He'd stood up. A blood vessel in the man's left eye had given way, the white of the sclera turning a bright, meaty red.

What are we looking for? the death-self echoed.

"They're going to fall back," Miller said, answering the first question. "We follow. Just outside the range so whoever's going last doesn't feel like he has to shoot us."

"Isn't everyone going to do the same thing? I mean, once they're gone, isn't everyone in this place going to head in for the port?"

"I expect so," Miller said. "So let's try to slip in ahead of the rush. Look. There."

It wasn't much. Just a change in the mercenaries' stance, a shift in their collective center of gravity. Miller coughed. It hurt more than it should have.

What are we looking for? his death-self asked again, its voice more insistent. *An answer? Justice? Another chance for the universe to kick us in the balls? What is through that archway that there isn't a faster, cleaner, less painful version of in the barrel of our gun?*

The mercenary captain took a casual step back and strode down the exterior corridor and out of sight. Where he had been, Julie Mao sat, watching him go. She looked at Miller. She waved him on.

"Not yet," he said.

"When?" Holden said, his voice surprising Miller. Julie in his head flickered out, and he was back in the real world.

"It's coming," Miller said.

He should warn the guy. It was only fair. You got into a bad place, and at the very least, you owed your partner the courtesy of letting him know. Miller cleared his throat. That hurt too.

It's possible I may start hallucinating or become suicidal. You might have to shoot me.

Holden glanced over at him. The pachinko machines lit them blue and green and shrieked in artificial delight.

"What?" Holden said.

"Nothing. Getting my balance," Miller said.

Behind them, a woman shouted. Miller glanced back to see her pushing a vomit zombie away, a slick of brown goo already covering the live woman. At the archway, the mercenaries quietly stepped back and started down the corridor.

"Come on," Miller said.

He and Holden walked toward the archway, Miller pulling his hat on. Loud voices, screams, the low, liquid sound of people being violently ill. The air scrubbers were failing, the air taking on a deep, pungent odor like beef broth and acid. Miller felt like there was a stone in his shoe, but he was almost certain if he looked, there would be only a point of redness where his skin was starting break down.

No one shot at them. No one told them to stop.

At the archway, Miller led Holden against the wall, then ducked his head around the corner. A quarter second was all it took to know the long, wide corridor was empty. The mercs were done here and leaving Eros to its fate. The window was open. The way was clear.

Last chance, he thought, and he meant both the last chance to live and the last one to die.

"Miller?"

"Yeah," he said. "It looks good. Come on. Before everyone gets the idea."

Chapter Thirty-One: Holden

Something was moving in Holden's gut. He ignored it and kept his eyes on Miller's back. The lanky detective barreled down the corridor toward the port, stopping occasionally at junctions to peek around the corner and look for trouble. Miller had become a machine. All Holden could do was try to keep up.

Always the same distance ahead were the mercenaries who'd been guarding the exit from the casino. When they moved, Miller moved. When they slowed down, he slowed. They were clearing a path to the port, but if they thought that any of the citizens were getting too close, they'd probably open fire. They were definitely shooting anyone they ran into along the way. They'd already shot two people who'd run at them. Both had been vomiting brown goo. *Where the hell did those vomit zombies come from so fast?*

"Where the hell did those vomit zombies come from so fast?" he said to Miller's back.

The detective shrugged with his left hand, his right still clutching his pistol.

"I don't think enough of that crap came out of Julie to infect the whole station," he replied without slowing down. "I'm guessing they were the first batch. The ones they incubated to get enough goo to infect the shelters with."

That made sense. And when the controlled portion of the experiment went to shit, you just turned them loose on the populace. By the time people figured out what was going on, half of them were infected already. Then it was just a matter of time.

They paused briefly at a corridor intersection, watching as the leader of the merc group stopped a hundred meters ahead and talked on his radio for a minute. Holden was gasping and trying to catch his breath when the group started up again, and Miller moved to follow. He reached out and grabbed the detective's belt and let Miller drag him along. Where did the skinny Belter keep this reserve of energy?

The detective stopped. His expression was blank.

"They're arguing," Miller said.

"Huh?"

"The leader of that group and some of the men. Arguing about something," Miller replied.

"So?" Holden asked, then coughed something wet into his hand. He wiped it off on the back of his pants, not looking to see if it was blood. *Please don't let it be blood.*

Miller shrugged with his hand again.

“I don’t think everyone’s on the same team here,” he said.

The merc group turned down another corridor, and Miller followed, yanking Holden along behind him. These were the outer levels, filled with warehouse space and ship repair and resupply depots. They didn’t see a lot of foot traffic at the best of times. Now the corridor echoed like a mausoleum with their footsteps. Up ahead, the merc group turned again, and before Miller and Holden could reach the junction, a lone figure wandered into view.

He didn’t appear to be armed, so Miller moved toward him cautiously, impatiently reaching behind himself and pulling Holden’s hand off his belt. Once he was free, Miller held up his left hand in an unmistakably cop-like gesture.

“This is a dangerous place to be wandering around, sir,” he said.

The man was now less than fifteen meters ahead of them and began moving toward them at a lurch. He was dressed for a party in a cheap tuxedo with a frilly shirt and sparkly red bow tie. He was wearing one shiny black shoe, the other foot covered with only a red sock. Brown vomit trickled from the corners of his mouth and stained the front of his white shirt.

“Shit,” Miller said, and brought up his gun.

Holden grabbed his arm and yanked it back down.

“He’s innocent in this,” Holden said, the sight of the injured and infected man making his eyes burn. “He’s innocent.”

“He’s still coming,” Miller said.

“So walk faster,” Holden said. “And if you shoot anyone else and I haven’t given you permission to, you don’t get a ride on my ship. Got me?”

“Trust me,” Miller said. “Dying is the best thing that could happen to that guy today. You’re not doing him any favors.”

“You don’t get to decide that,” Holden replied, his tone edging into real anger.

Miller started to reply, but Holden held up one hand and cut him off.

“You want on the *Roci?* I’m the boss, then. No questions, no bullshit.”

Miller’s smirk turned into a smile. “Yes, sir,” he said. “Our mercs are getting ahead of us.” He pointed down the corridor.

Miller nodded and moved off again at his steady, machinelike pace. Holden didn’t turn around, but he could hear the man Miller had almost shot crying in the corridor behind him for a long time. To cover up the sound, which probably existed only in his head once they’d made a couple more turns in the corridor, he began humming the theme to *Misko and Marisko* again.

Mother Elise, who’d been the one to stay home with him when he

was very young, had always brought him something to eat while he watched, and then sat by him with her hand on his head, playing with his hair. She'd laughed at the dinosaur antics even harder than he had. One Halloween she'd made him a big pink hat to wear so that he could be the evil Count Mungo. Why had that guy been trying to capture the dinosaurs, anyway? It had never really been clear. Maybe he just liked dinosaurs. One time he'd used a shrink ray and—

Holden slammed into Miller's back. The detective had stopped suddenly and now moved quickly to one side of the corridor, crouching low to keep himself in the shadows. Holden followed suit. About thirty meters ahead, the mercenary group had gotten much bigger and had split into two factions.

"Yep," Miller said. "Whole lot of people having really bad days today."

Holden nodded and wiped something wet off his face. It was blood. He didn't think he'd hit Miller's back hard enough to bloody his nose, and he had a suspicion it wasn't going to stop on its own. Mucous membranes getting fragile. Wasn't that part of radiation burning? He tore strips off his shirt and stuffed them up his nostrils while he watched the scene at the end of the corridor.

There were two clear groups, and they did seem to be engaged in some sort of heated argument. Normally, that would have been fine. Holden didn't care about the social lives of mercenaries. But these mercenaries numbered by this time close to a hundred, were heavily armed, and blocked the corridor that led to his ship. That made their argument worth watching.

"Not everyone from Protogen left, I think," Miller said quietly, pointing at one of the two groups. "Those guys on the right don't look like the home team."

Holden looked at the group and nodded. They were definitely the more professional-looking soldiers. Their armor fit well. The other group looked like it was largely made up of guys dressed in police riot gear, with only a few men in combat armor.

"Want to guess what the argument is about?" Miller asked.

"*Hey, can we have a ride too?*" Holden said mockingly with a Ceres accent. *"Uh, no, we need you guys to stay here and, uh, keep an eye on things, which we promise will be* totally *safe and* absolutely not *involve you turning into vomit zombies."*

He actually got a chuckle from Miller and then the corridor erupted in a barrage of gunfire. Both sides of the discussion were firing automatic weapons at each other from point-blank range. The noise was deafening. Men screamed and flew apart, spraying the corridor and each other with blood and body parts. Holden dropped flat to the floor but continued watching the firefight.

After the initial barrage, the survivors from both groups began falling back in opposite directions, still firing as they moved. The floor at the corridor junction was littered with bodies. Holden estimated that twenty or more men had died in that first second of the fight. The sounds of gunfire grew more distant as the two groups fired at each other down the corridor.

In the middle of the junction, one of the bodies on the floor suddenly stirred and raised its head. Even before the wounded man could get to his feet, a bullet hole appeared in the middle of his face shield and he dropped back to the floor with limp finality.

"Where's your ship?" Miller asked.

"The lift is at the end of this corridor," Holden replied.

Miller spat what looked like bloody phlegm on the floor.

"And the corridor that crosses it is now a war zone, with armed camps sniping at each other from both sides," he said. "I guess we could try just running through it."

"Is there another option?" Holden asked.

Miller looked at his terminal.

"We're fifty-three minutes past the deadline Naomi set," he said. "How much more time do you want to waste?"

"Look, I was never particularly good at math," Holden said. "But I'd guess there are as many as forty guys in either direction down that other corridor. A corridor which is a good three, maybe three and a half meters wide. Which means that we give eighty guys three meters worth of shots at us. Even dumb luck means we get hit a lot and then die. Let's think of a plan B."

As if to underline his argument, another fusillade broke out in the cross corridor, gouging chunks out of the rubbery wall insulation and chewing up the bodies lying on the floor.

"They're still withdrawing," Miller said. "Those shots came from farther away. I guess we can just wait them out. I mean, if we can."

The rags Holden had stuffed up his nose hadn't stopped the bleeding; they had just dammed it up. He could feel a steady trickle down the back of his throat that made his stomach heave with nausea. Miller was right. They were getting down to the last of their ability to wait anyone out at this point.

"Goddamn, I wish we could call and see if Naomi is even there," Holden said, looking at the flashing *Network Not Available* on his terminal.

"Shhh," Miller whispered, putting one finger on his lips. He pointed back down the corridor in the direction they'd come, and now Holden could hear heavy footsteps approaching.

"Late guests to the party," Miller said, and Holden nodded. The two men swiveled around, pointing their guns down the corridor and

waiting.

A group of four men in police riot armor rounded the corner. They didn't have their guns out, and two of them had their helmets off. Apparently they hadn't heard about the new hostilities. Holden waited for Miller to fire and, when he didn't, turned to look at him. Miller was staring back.

"I didn't dress real warm," Miller said, almost apologetically. It took Holden half a second to understand what he meant.

Holden gave him permission by shooting first. He targeted one of the mafia thugs without a helmet and shot him in the face, then continued firing at the group until his gun's slide locked open when the magazine was empty. Miller had begun firing a split second after Holden's first shot and also fired until his gun was empty. When it was over, all four thugs were lying facedown in the corridor. Holden let out a long breath that turned into a sigh, and sat down on the floor.

Miller walked to the fallen men and nudged each one in turn with his foot as he replaced the magazine in his gun. Holden didn't bother reloading his. He was done with gunfights. He put the empty pistol in his pocket and got up to join the cop. He bent down and began unbuckling the least damaged armor he could find. Miller raised an eyebrow but didn't move to help.

"We're making a run for it," Holden said, swallowing back the vomit-and-blood taste in his throat as he pulled the chest and back armor free of the first man. "But maybe if we wear this stuff, it will help."

"Might," Miller said with a nod, then knelt down to help strip a second man.

Holden put on the dead man's armor, working hard to believe that the pink trail down the back was absolutely not part of the man's brain. Undoing the straps was exhausting. His fingers felt numb and awkward. He picked up the thigh armor, then put it down again. He'd rather run fast. Miller had finished buckling his on too and picked up one of the undamaged helmets. Holden found one with just a dent in it and slipped it onto his head. It felt greasy inside, and he was glad he had no sense of smell. He suspected that its previous occupant hadn't bathed often.

Miller fiddled with the side of his helmet until the radio came on. The cop's voice was echoed a split second later over the helmet's tinny speakers as he said, "Hey, we're coming out into the corridor! Don't shoot! We're coming to join up!"

Thumbing off the mic, he turned to Holden and said, "Well, maybe one side won't be shooting at us now."

They moved back down the corridor and stopped ten meters from the intersection. Holden counted down from three and then took off at

the best run he could manage. It was dishearteningly slow; his legs felt like they were filled with lead. Like he was running in a pool of water. Like he was in a nightmare. He could hear Miller just behind him, his shoes slapping on the concrete floor, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

Then he heard only the sound of gunfire. He couldn't tell if Miller's plan had worked. Couldn't tell which direction the gunfire was coming from. It was constant and deafening and started the instant he entered the cross corridor. When he was three meters from the other side, he lowered his head and jumped forward. In Eros' light gravity, he seemed to fly, and he was nearly to the other side when a burst of bullets caught him in the armor over his ribs and slammed him into the corridor wall with a spine-jarring crack. He dragged himself the rest of the way as bullets continued to hit all around his legs, one of them passing through the meaty part of his calf.

Miller tripped over him, flying a few feet farther down the hall and then collapsing in a heap. Holden crawled to his side.

"Still alive?"

Miller nodded. "Got shot. Arm's broke. Keep moving," he gasped out.

Holden climbed to his feet, his left leg feeling like it was on fire as the muscle in his calf clenched around his gaping wound. He pulled Miller up and then leaned on him as they limped toward the elevator. Miller's left arm was dangling boneless at his side, and blood was pouring off his hand.

Holden punched the button to call the lift, and he and Miller leaned on each other while they waited. He hummed the *Misko and Marisko* theme to himself, and after a few seconds, Miller started too.

Holden punched the button for the *Rocinante*'s berth and waited for the elevator to stop at a blank gray airlock door with no ship beyond it. That would be when he finally had permission to lie down on the floor and die. He looked forward to that moment when his exertions could end with a relief that would have surprised him if he'd still been capable of surprise. Miller let go of him and slid down the lift wall, leaving a blood trail on the shiny metal and ending in a pile on the floor. The man's eyes were closed. He could almost have been sleeping. Holden watched the detective's chest rise and fall in ragged, painful breaths that grew smoother and more shallow.

Holden envied him, but he had to see that closed airlock door before he could lie down. He began to feel faintly angry with the elevator for taking so long.

It stopped, lift doors sliding open with a cheerful ding.

Amos stood in the airlock on the other side, an assault rifle in each hand and two belts of magazines for the rifles slung on his shoulders.

He looked Holden up and down once, then glanced over to Miller and back again.

"Jesus, Captain, you look like shit."

Chapter Thirty-Two: Miller

Miller's mind reassembled slowly and with several false starts. In his dreams, he was fitting a puzzle together as the pieces kept changing shape, and each time, just as he was on the verge of slipping the whole mechanism together, the dream began again. The first thing he became aware of was the ache at the small of his back, then the heaviness of his arms and legs, then the nausea. The nearer he came to consciousness, the more he tried to postpone it. Imaginary fingers tried to complete the puzzle, and before he could make it all fit, his eyes opened.

He couldn't move his head. Something was in his neck: a thick bundle of black tubes reaching out of him and up past the limits of his vision. He tried to lift his arms, to push the invading, vampiric thing away, but he couldn't.

It got me, he thought with a thrill of fear. *I'm infected.*

The woman appeared from his left. He was surprised she wasn't Julie. Deep brown skin, dark eyes with just a hint of an epicanthic fold. She smiled at him. Black hair draped down the side of her face.

Down. There was a *down.* There was gravity. They were under thrust. That seemed very important, but he didn't know why.

"Hey, Detective," Naomi said. "Welcome back."

Where am I? he tried to say. His throat felt solid. Crowded like too many people in a tube station.

"Don't try to get up or talk or anything," she said. "You've been under for about thirty-six hours. Good news is we have a sick bay with a military-grade expert system and supplies for fifteen Martian soldiers. I think we burned half of what we've got on you and the captain."

The captain. Holden. That was right. They'd been in a fight. There had been a corridor and people shooting. And someone had been sick. He remembered a woman, covered in brown vomit, with vacant eyes, but he didn't know whether it was part of a nightmare.

Naomi was still talking. Something about full plasma flushes and cell damage. He tried to lift a hand, to reach out to her, but a strap restrained him. The ache in his back was his kidneys, and he wondered what exactly was getting filtered out of his blood. Miller closed his eyes, asleep before he could decide whether to rest.

No dreams troubled him this time. He roused again when something deep in his throat shifted, pulled at his larynx, and retreated. Without opening his eyes, he rolled to his side, coughed, puked, and rolled back.

When he woke, he was breathing on his own. His throat felt sore and abused, but his hands weren't tied down. Drainage tubes ran out of his belly and side, and there was a catheter the size of a pencil coming out his penis. Nothing particularly hurt, so he had to assume he was on pretty nearly all the narcotics there were. His clothes were gone, his modesty preserved only by a thin paper gown and a cast that held his left arm stony and immovable. Someone had put his hat on the next bed over.

The sick bay, now that he could see it, looked like a ward on a high-production entertainment feed. It wasn't a hospital; it was the matte-black-and-silver idea of what a hospital was supposed to be. The monitors hung suspended in the air on complex armatures, reporting his blood pressure, nucleic acid concentrations, oxygenation, fluid balance. There were two separate countdowns running, one to the next round of autophagics, the other for pain medication. And across the aisle, at another station, Holden's statistics looked more or less the same.

Holden looked like a ghost. His skin was pale and his sclera were red with a hundred little hemorrhages. His face was puffy from steroids.

"Hey," Miller said.

Holden lifted a hand, waving gently.

"We made it," Miller said. His voice sounded like it had been dragged down an alley by its ankles.

"Yeah," Holden said.

"That was ugly."

"Yeah."

Miller nodded. That had taken all the energy he had. He lay back down and fell, if not asleep, at least unconscious. Just before his mind flickered back into forgetfulness, he smiled. He'd made it. He was on Holden's ship. And they were going to find whatever Julie had left behind for them.

Voices woke him.

"Maybe you shouldn't, then."

It was the woman. Naomi. Part of Miller cursed her for disturbing him, but there was a buzz in her voice—not fear or anger, but close enough to be interesting. He didn't move, didn't even swim all the way back to awareness. But he listened.

"I need to," Holden said. He sounded phlegmy, like someone who needed to cough. "What happened on Eros… it's put a lot of things in perspective. I've been a holding something back."

"Captain—"

"No, hear me out. When I was in there thinking that all I was going to have left was half an hour of rigged pachinko games and then

death… when that happened, I knew what my regrets were. You know? I felt all the things that I wished I'd done and never had the courage for. Now that I know, I can't just ignore it. I can't pretend it isn't there."

"Captain," Naomi said again, and the buzz in her voice was stronger.

Don't say it, you poor bastard, Miller thought.

"I'm in love with you, Naomi," Holden said.

The pause lasted no longer than a heartbeat.

"No, sir," she said. "You aren't."

"I am. I know what you're thinking. I've been through this big traumatic experience and I'm doing the whole thing where I want to affirm life and make connections, and maybe some of that's part of it. But you have to believe that I know what I feel. And when I was down there, I knew that the thing that I wanted the most was to get back to you."

"Captain. How long have we served together?"

"What? I don't know exactly… "

"Ballpark estimate."

"Eight and a half runs makes it almost five years," Holden said. Miller could hear the confusion in his voice.

"All right. And in that time, how many of the crew did you share bunks with?"

"Does it matter?"

"Only a little."

"A few."

"More than a dozen?"

"No," he said, but he didn't sound sure.

"Let's call it ten," Naomi said.

"Okay. But this is different. I'm not talking about having a little shipboard romance to pass the time. Ever since—"

Miller imagined the woman holding up her hand or taking Holden's or maybe just glaring at him. Something to stop the flow of words.

"And do you know when I fell for you, sir?"

Sorrow. That was what the strain in her voice was. Sorrow. Disappointment. Regret.

"When… when you… "

"I can tell you the day," Naomi said. "You were about seven weeks into that first run. I was still smarting that some Earther had come in from out of the ecliptic and taken my XO job. I didn't like you much right at the start. You were too charming, too pretty, and too damn comfortable in my chair. But there was a poker game in the engine room. You and me and those two Luna boys out of engineering and Kamala Trask. You remember Trask?"

“She was the comm tech. The one who was… ”

“Built like a refrigerator? Face like a bulldog puppy?”

“I remember her.”

“She had the biggest crush on you. Used to cry herself to sleep at night all through that run. She wasn’t in that game because she cared about poker. She just wanted to breathe some of your air, and everyone knew it. Even you. And all that night, I watched you and her, and you never once led her along. You never gave her any reason to think she had a chance with you. And you still treated her with respect. That was the first time I thought you might be a decent XO, and it was the first time I wished that I could be the girl in your bunk at shift’s end.”

“Because of Trask?”

“That and you’ve got a great ass, sir. My point is we flew together for four years and more. And I would have come along with you any day of that if you’d asked me.”

“I didn’t know,” Holden said. He sounded a little strangled.

“You didn’t ask. You always had your sights set someplace else. And, honestly, I think Belter women just put you off. Until the *Cant*… Until it was just the five of us. I’ve seen you looking at me. I know exactly what those looks mean, because I spent four years on the other side of them. But I only got your attention when I was the only female on board, and that’s not good enough for me.”

“I don’t know—”

“No, sir, you don’t. That’s my point. I’ve watched you seduce a lot of women, and I know how you do it. You get fixed on her, you get excited by her. Then you convince yourself that the two of you have some kind of special connection, and by the time you believe it, she usually thinks it’s true too. And then you sleep together for a while, and the connection gets a little faded. One or the other of you says something like *professional* or *appropriate boundaries* or starts worrying what the crew will think, and the whole thing slides away. Afterwards they still like you. All of them. You do it all so well they don’t even feel like they get to hate you for it.”

“That’s not true.”

“It is. And until you figure out that you don’t have to love everyone you bed down with, I’m never going to know whether you love me or just want to bed down. And I won’t sleep with you until *you* know which it is. The smart money isn’t on love.”

“I was just—”

“If you want to sleep with me,” Naomi said, “be honest. Respect me enough for that. Okay?”

Miller coughed. He hadn’t meant to, hadn’t even been aware he was going to. His belly went tight, his throat clamped down, and he

coughed wet and deep. Once he started, it was hard to stop. He sat up, eyes watering from the effort. Holden was lying back on his bed. Naomi sat on the next bed over, smiling like there had been nothing to overhear. Holden's monitors showed an elevated heart rate and blood pressure. Miller could only hope the poor bastard hadn't gotten an erection with the catheter still in.

"Hey, Detective," Naomi said. "How're you feeling?"

Miller nodded.

"I've felt worse," he said. Then, a moment later: "No. I haven't. But I'm all right. How bad was it?"

"You're both dead," Naomi said. "Seriously, we had to override the triage filters on both of you more than once. The expert system kept clicking you over into hospice care and shooting you full of morphine."

She said it lightly, but he believed her. He tried to sit up. His body still felt terribly heavy, but he didn't know if it was from weakness or the ship thrust. Holden was quiet, jaw clamped tight. Miller pretended not to notice.

"Long-term estimates?"

"You're both going to need to be checked for new cancers every month for the rest of your lives. The captain has a new implant where his thyroid used to be, since his real one was pretty much cooked down. We had to take out about a foot and a half of your small bowel that wouldn't stop bleeding. You're both going to bruise easy for a while, and if you wanted kids, I hope you have some sperm in a bank someplace, because all your little soldiers have two heads now."

Miller chuckled. His monitors blinked into alarm mode and then back out.

"You sound like you trained as a med tech," he said.

"Nope. Engineer. But I've been reading the printouts every day, so I've got the lingo down. I wish Shed was still here," she said, and sounded sad for the first time.

That was the second time someone had mentioned Shed. There was a story there, but Miller let it drop.

"Hair going to fall out?" he asked.

"Maybe," Naomi said. "The system shot you full of the drugs that are supposed to stop that, but if the follicles die, they die."

"Well. Good thing I've still got my hat. What about Eros?"

Naomi's false light tone failed her.

"It's dead," Holden said from his bed, turning to look at Miller. "I think we were the last ship out. The station isn't answering calls, and all the automatic systems have it in a quarantine lockdown."

"Rescue ships?" Miller asked, and coughed again. His throat was still sore.

“Not going to happen,” Naomi said. “There were a million and a half people on station. No one has the resources to put into that kind of rescue op.”

“After all,” Holden said, “there’s a war on.”

The ship system dimmed the lights for night. Miller lay on his bed. The expert system had shifted his treatment regimen into a new phase, and for the past three hours, he’d alternated between spiking fevers and teeth-chattering chills. His teeth and the nail beds of his fingers and toes ached. Sleep wasn’t an option, so he lay in the gloom and tried to pull himself together.

He wondered what his old partners would have made of his behavior on Eros. Havelock. Muss. He tried to imagine them in his place. He’d killed people, and he’d done it cold. Eros had been a kill box, and when the people in charge of the law wanted you dead, the law didn’t apply anymore. And some of the dead assholes had been the ones who’d killed Julie.

So. Revenge killing. Was he really down to revenge killing? That was a sad thought. He tried to imagine Julie sitting beside him the way Naomi had with Holden. It was like she’d been waiting for the invitation. Julie Mao, who he’d never really known. She raised a hand in greeting.

And what about us? he asked her as he looked into her dark, unreal eyes. *Do I love you, or do I just want to love you so bad I can’t tell the difference?*

“Hey, Miller,” Holden said, and Julie vanished. “You awake?”

“Yeah. Can’t sleep.”

“Me either.”

They were silent for a moment. The expert system hummed. Miller’s left arm itched under its cast as the tissue went through another round of forced regrowth.

“You doing okay?” Miller asked.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Holden said sharply.

“You killed that guy,” Miller said. “Back on the station. You shot him. I mean, I know you shot at guys before that. Back at the hotel. But right at the end there, you actually hit somebody in the face.”

“Yeah. I did.”

“You good with that?”

“Sure,” Holden said, too quickly.

The air recyclers hummed, and the blood pressure cuff on Miller's good arm squeezed him like a hand. Holden didn't speak, but when Miller squinted, he could see the elevated blood pressure and the uptick in brain activity.

"They always made us take time off," Miller said.

"What?"

"When we shot someone. Whether they died or not, they always made us take a leave of absence. Turn in our weapon. Go talk to the headshrinker."

"Bureaucrats," Holden said.

"They had a point," Miller said. "Shooting someone does something to you. Killing someone… that's even worse. Doesn't matter that they had it coming or you didn't have a choice. Or maybe a little difference. But it doesn't take it away."

"Seems like you got over it, though."

"Maybe," Miller said. "Look. All that I said back there about how you kill someone? About how leaving them alive wasn't doing them any favors? I'm sorry that happened."

"You think you were wrong?"

"I wasn't. But I'm still sorry it happened."

"Okay."

"Jesus. Look, I'm saying it's good that it bothers you. It's good that you can't stop seeing it or hearing it. That part where it haunts you some? That's the way it's supposed to be."

Holden was quiet for a moment. When he spoke again, his voice was gray as stone.

"I've killed people before, you know. But they were blips in a radar track. I—"

"It's not the same, is it?" Miller said.

"No, it isn't," Holden replied. "Does this go away?"

Sometimes, Miller thought.

"No," he said. "Not if you've still got a soul."

"Okay. Thanks."

"One other thing?"

"Yeah?"

"I know it's none of my business, but I really wouldn't let her put you off. So you don't understand sex and love and women. Just means you were born with a cock. And this girl? Naomi? She seems like she's worth putting a little effort into it. You know?"

"Yeah," Holden said. Then: "Can we never talk about that again?"

"Sure."

The ship creaked and gravity shifted a degree to Miller's right. Course correction. Nothing interesting. Miller closed his eyes and tried to will himself to sleep. His mind was full of dead men and Julie and

love and sex. There was something Holden had said about the war that was important, but he couldn't make the pieces fit. They kept changing. Miller sighed, shifted his weight so that he blocked one of his drainage tubes and had to shift back to stop the alarm.

When the blood pressure cuff fired off again, it was Julie holding him, pulling herself so close her lips brushed his ear. His eyes opened, his mind seeing both the imaginary girl and the monitors that she would have blocked if she'd really been there.

I love you too, she said, *and I* will *take care of you.*

He smiled at seeing the numbers change as his heart raced.

Chapter Thirty-Three: Holden

For five more days, Holden and Miller lay on their backs in sick bay while the solar system burned down around them. The reports of Eros' death ran from massive ecological collapse brought about by war-related supply shortages, to covert Martian attack, to secret Belt bioweapon laboratory accident. Analysis from the inner planets had it that the OPA and terrorists like them had finally shown how dangerous they could be to innocent civilian populations. The Belt blamed Mars, or the maintenance crews of Eros, or the OPA for not stopping it.

And then a group of Martian frigates blockaded Pallas, a revolt on Ganymede ended in sixteen dead, and the new government of Ceres announced that all ships with Martian registry docked on station were being commandeered. The threats and accusations, all set to the constant human background noise of war drums, moved on. Eros had been a tragedy and a crime, but it was finished, and there were new dangers popping up in every corner of human space.

Holden turned off his newsfeed, fidgeted in his bunk, and tried to wake Miller up by staring at him. It didn't work. The massive radiation exposure had failed to give him superpowers. Miller began to snore.

Holden sat up, testing the gravity. Less than a quarter g. Alex wasn't in a hurry, then. Naomi was giving him and Miller time to heal before they arrived at Julie's magical mystery asteroid.

Shit.

Naomi.

The last few times she'd come into sick bay had been awkward. She never brought the subject of his failed romantic gesture back up, but he could feel a barrier between them now that filled him with regret. And every time she left the room, Miller would look away from him and sigh, which just made it worse.

But he couldn't avoid her forever, no matter how much he felt like an idiot. He swung his feet off the edge of the bed and pressed down on the floor. His legs felt weak but not rubbery. The soles of his feet hurt, but quite a bit less than nearly everything else on his body. He stood up, one hand still on the bed, and tested his balance. He wobbled but remained upright. Two steps reassured him that walking was possible in the light gravity. The IV tugged at his arm. He was down to just one bag of something a faint blue. He had no idea what it was, but after Naomi's description of how close to death he'd come, he figured it must be important. He pulled it off the wall hook and held it

in his left hand. The room smelled like antiseptic and diarrhea. He was happy to be leaving.

"Where you going?" Miller asked, his voice groggy.

"Out." Holden had the sudden, visceral memory of being fifteen.

"Okay," Miller said, then rolled onto his side.

The sick bay hatch was four meters from the central ladder, and Holden covered the ground with a slow, careful shuffle, his paper booties making a whispery scuffing sound on the fabric-covered metal floor. The ladder itself defeated him. Even though ops was only one deck up, the three-meter climb might as well have been a thousand. He pressed the button to call the lift, and a few seconds later, the floor hatch slid open and the lift climbed through with an electric whine. Holden tried to hop on but managed only a sort of slow-motion fall that ended with his clutching the ladder and kneeling on the lift platform. He stopped the lift, pulled himself upright, and started it again, then rode it up to the next deck in what he hoped was a less beaten and more captain-like pose.

"Jesus, Captain, you *still* look like shit," Amos said as the lift came to a stop. The mechanic was sprawled across two chairs at the sensor stations and munching on what looked like a strip of leather.

"You keep saying that."

"Keeps bein' true."

"Amos, don't you have work to do?" Naomi said. She was sitting at one of the computer stations, watching something flash by on the screen. She didn't look up when Holden came onto the deck. That was a bad sign.

"Nope. Most boring ship I ever worked, Boss. She don't break, she don't leak, she don't even have an annoying rattle to tighten down," Amos replied as he sucked down the last of his snack and smacked his lips.

"There's always mopping," Naomi said, then tapped out something on the screen in front of her. Amos looked from her to Holden and back again.

"Oh, that reminds me. I better get down to the engine room and look at that… thing I've been meaning to look at," Amos said, and jumped to his feet. "'Scuse me, Cap."

He squeezed past Holden, hopped on the lift, and rode it sternward. The deck hatch closed behind him.

"Hey," Holden said to Naomi once Amos was gone.

"Hey," she said without turning around. That wasn't good either. When she'd sent Amos away, he'd hoped she wanted to talk. It didn't look like it. Holden sighed and shuffled over to the chair next to her. He collapsed into it, his legs tingling like he'd run a kilometer instead of just walking twenty-odd steps. Naomi had left her hair down, and it

hid her face from him. Holden wanted to brush it back but was afraid she'd snap his elbow with Belter kung fu if he tried.

"Look, Naomi," he started, but she ignored him and hit a button on her panel. He stopped when Fred's face appeared on the display in front of her.

"Is that Fred?" he said, because he couldn't think of anything even more idiotic to say.

"You should see this. Got it from Tycho a couple hours ago on the tightbeam after I sent them an update on our status."

Naomi tapped the play button and Fred's face sprang to life.

"Naomi, sounds like you guys have had a tough time of it. The air's full of chatter on the station shutdown, and the supposed nuclear explosion. No one knows what to make of it. Keep us informed. In the meantime, we managed to hack open that data cube you left here. I don't think it'll help much, though. Looks like a bunch of sensor data from the *Donnager,* mostly EM stuff. We've tried looking for hidden messages, but my smartest people can't find anything. I'm passing the data along to you. Let me know if you find anything. Tycho out."

The screen went blank.

"What does the data look like?" Holden asked.

"It's just what the man said," Naomi said. "EM sensor data from the *Donnager* during the pursuit by the six ships, and the battle itself. I've dug through raw stuff, looking for anything hidden inside, but for the life of me, I can't find a thing. I've even had the *Roci* digging through the data for the last couple hours, looking for patterns. She has really good software for that sort of thing. But so far, nothing."

She tapped on the screen again and the raw data began spooling past faster than Holden could follow. In a small window inside the larger screen, the *Rocinante*'s pattern-recognition software worked to find meaning. Holden watched it for a minute, but his eyes quickly unfocused.

"Lieutenant Kelly died for this data," he said. "He left the ship while his mates were still fighting. Marines don't do that unless it matters."

Naomi shrugged and pointed at the screen with resignation.

"That's what was on his cube," she said. "Maybe there's something steganographic, but I don't have another dataset to compare it to."

Holden began tapping on his thigh, his pain and romantic failures momentarily forgotten.

"So let's say that this data is all that it is. There's nothing hidden. What would this information mean to the Martian navy?"

Naomi leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes in thought, one finger twisting and untwisting a curl of hair by her temple.

"It's mostly EM data, so lots of engine-signature stuff. Drive radiation is the best way to keep track of other ships. So that tells you

where which ships were during the fight. Tactical data?"

"Maybe," Holden said. "Would that be important enough to send Kelly out with?"

Naomi took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"I don't think so," she said.

"Me either."

Something tapped at the edge of his conscious mind, asking to be let in.

"What was that thing with Amos all about?" he said.

"Amos?"

"Him showing up at the airlock with two guns when we arrived," he said.

"There was some trouble on our trip back to the ship."

"Trouble for who?" Holden asked. Naomi actually smiled at that.

"Some bad men didn't want us to hack the lockdown on the *Roci*. Amos talked it over with them. You didn't think it was because we were *waiting* for you, did you, sir?"

Was there a smile in her voice? A hint of coyness? Flirtation? He stopped himself from grinning.

"What did the *Roci* say about the data when you ran it?" Holden asked.

"Here," Naomi replied, and hit something on her panel. The screen began displaying long lists of data in text. "Lots of EM and light spectrum stuff, some leakage from damaged—"

Holden yelped. Naomi looked up at him.

"I'm such an idiot," Holden said.

"Granted. Elaborate?"

Holden touched the screen and began scrolling up and down through the data. He tapped one long list of numbers and letters and leaned back with a grin.

"There, that's it," he said.

"That's what?"

"Hull structure isn't the only recognition metric. It's the most accurate, but it's also got the shortest range and"—he gestured around him at the *Rocinante*—"is the easiest to fool. The next best method is drive signature. Can't mask your radiation and heat patterns. And they're easy to spot even from really far away."

Holden turned on the screen next to his chair and pulled up the ship's friend/foe database, then linked it to the data on Naomi's screen.

"That's what this message is, Naomi. It's telling Mars who killed the *Donnager* by showing them what the drive signature was."

"Then why not just say, 'So-and-so killed us,' in a nice easy-to-read text file?" Naomi asked, a skeptical frown on her face.

Holden leaned forward and paused, opened his mouth, then closed it and sat back again with a sigh.

"I don't know."

A hatch banged open with a hydraulic whine; then Naomi looked past Holden to the ladder and said, "Miller's coming up."

Holden turned to watch the detective finish the slow climb up from the sick bay deck. He looked like a plucked chicken, pink-gray skin stippled with gooseflesh. His paper gown went poorly with the hat.

"Uh, there's a lift," Holden said.

"Wish I'd known that," Miller replied, then dragged himself up onto the ops deck with a gasp. "We there yet?"

"Trying to figure out a mystery," Holden said.

"I hate mysteries," Miller said, then hauled himself to his feet and made his way to a chair.

"Then solve this one for us. You find out who murdered someone. You can't arrest them yourself, so you send the information to your partner. But instead of just sending the perp's name, you send your partner all the clues. Why?"

Miller coughed and scratched his chin. His eyes were fixed on something, like he was reading a screen Holden couldn't see.

"Because I don't trust myself. I want my partner to arrive at the same conclusion I did, without my biasing him. I give him the dots, see what it looks like when he connects 'em."

"Especially if guessing wrong has consequences," Naomi said.

"You don't like to screw up a murder charge," Miller said with a nod. "Looks unprofessional."

Holden's panel beeped at him.

"Shit, I know why they were careful," he said after reading his screen. "The *Roci* thinks those were standard light-cruiser engines built by the Bush Shipyards."

"They were Earth ships?" Naomi said. "But they weren't flying any colors, and… Son of a *bitch*!"

It was the first time Holden had ever heard her yell, and he understood. If UNN black ops ships had killed the *Donnager,* then that meant Earth was behind the whole thing. Maybe even killing the *Canterbury* in the first place. It would mean that Martian warships were killing Belters for no reason. Belters like Naomi.

Holden leaned forward and called up the comm display, then tapped out a general broadcast. Miller caught his breath.

"That button you just pressed doesn't do what I think it does, does it?" he said.

"I finished Kelly's mission for him," Holden said.

"I have no idea who the fuck Kelly is," Miller said, "but please tell me that his mission wasn't broadcasting that data to the solar system

at large."

"People need to know what's going on," Holden said.

"Yes, they do, but maybe we should actually know what the hell is going on before we tell them," Miller replied, all the weariness gone from his voice. "How gullible *are* you?"

"Hey," Holden said, but Miller got louder.

"You found a Martian battery, right? So you told everyone in the solar system about it and started the single largest war in human history. Only turns out the Martians maybe weren't the ones that left it there. Then, a bunch of mystery ships kill the *Donnager,* which Mars blames on the Belt, only, dammit, the Belt didn't even know it was *capable* of killing a Martian battle cruiser."

Holden opened his mouth, but Miller grabbed a bulb of coffee Amos had left behind on the console and threw it at his head.

"Let me finish! And now you find some data that implicates Earth. First thing you do is blab it to the universe, so that Mars *and* the Belt drag Earth into this thing, making the largest war of all time even bigger. Are you seeing a pattern here?"

"Yes," Naomi said.

"So what do you think's going to happen?" Miller said. "This is how these people work! They made the *Canterbury* look like Mars. It wasn't. They made the *Donnager* look like the Belt. It wasn't. Now it looks like the whole damn thing's Earth? Follow the pattern. It probably isn't! You never, *never* put that kind of accusation out there until you know the score. You look. You listen. You're quiet, fercrissakes, and when you know, *then* you can make your case."

The detective sat back, clearly exhausted. He was sweating. The deck was silent.

"You done?" Holden said.

Miller nodded, breathing heavily. "Think I might have strained something."

"I haven't accused anyone of doing anything," Holden said. "I'm not building a case. I just put the data out there. Now it's not a secret. They're doing something on Eros. They don't want it interrupted. With Mars and the Belt shooting at each other, everyone with the resources to help is busy elsewhere."

"And you just dragged Earth into it," Miller said.

"Maybe," Holden said. "But the killers *did* use ships that were built, at least in part, at Earth's orbital shipyards. Maybe someone will look into that. And *that's* the point. If everyone knows everything, nothing stays secret."

"Yeah, well," Miller said. Holden ignored him

"Eventually, someone'll figure out the big picture. This kind of thing requires secrecy to function, so exposing all the secrets hurts them in

the end. It's the only way this really, permanently stops."

Miller sighed, nodded to himself, took off his hat, and scratched his scalp.

"I was just going to put 'em out an airlock," Miller said.

BA834024112 wasn't much of an asteroid. Barely thirty meters across, it had long ago been surveyed and found completely devoid of useful or valuable minerals. It existed in the registry only to warn ships not to run into it. Julie had left it tethered to wealth measured in the billions when she flew her small shuttle to Eros.

Up close, the ship that had killed the *Scopuli* and stolen its crew looked like a shark. It was long and lean and utterly black, almost impossible to see against the backdrop of space with the naked eye. Its radar-deflecting curves gave it an aerodynamic look almost always lacking in space-going vessels. It made Holden's skin crawl, but it was beautiful.

"Motherfucker," Amos said under his breath as the crew clustered in the cockpit of the *Rocinante* to look at it.

"The *Roci* doesn't even see it, Cap," Alex said. "I'm pourin' ladar into it, and all we see is a slightly warmer spot on the asteroid."

"Like Becca saw just before the *Cant* died," Naomi said.

"Her shuttle's been launched, so I'm guessin' this is the right stealth ship someone left tied to a rock," Alex added. "Case there's more than one."

Holden tapped his fingers on the back of Alex's chair for a moment as he floated over the pilot's head.

"It's probably full of vomit zombies," Holden finally said.

"Want to go see?" said Miller.

"Oh yeah," Holden said.

Chapter Thirty-Four: Miller

The environment suit was better than Miller was used to. He'd only done a couple walks outside during his years on Ceres, and the Star Helix equipment had been old back then: thick corrugated joints, separable air-supply unit, gloves that left his hands thirty degrees colder than the rest of his body. The *Rocinante*'s suits were military and recent, no bulkier than standard riot gear, with integrated life support that could probably keep fingers warm after a hand got shot off. Miller floated, one hand on a strap in the airlock, and flexed his fingers, watching the sharkskin pattern of the knuckle joints.

It didn't feel like enough.

"All right, Alex," Holden said. "We're in place. Have the *Roci* knock for us."

A deep, rumbling vibration shook them. Naomi put a hand against the airlock's curved wall to steady herself. Amos shifted forward to take point, a reactionless automatic rifle in his hands. When he bent his neck, Miller could hear the vertebrae cracking through his radio. It was the only way he could have heard it; they were already in vacuum.

"Okay, Captain," Alex said. "I've got a seal. The standard security override isn't working, so give me a second… to… "

"Problem?" Holden said.

"Got it. I've got it. We have a connection," Alex said. Then, a moment later: "Ah. It doesn't look like there's much to breathe over there."

"Anything?" Holden asked.

"Nope. Hard vacuum," Alex said. "Both her lock doors are open."

"All right, folks," Holden said, "keep an eye on your air supply. Let's go."

Miller took a long breath. The external airlock went from soft red to soft green. Holden slid it open, and Amos launched forward, the captain just behind him. Miller gestured to Naomi with a nod. *Ladies first.*

The connecting gantry was reinforced, ready to deflect enemy lasers or slow down slugs. Amos landed on the other ship as the hatch to the *Rocinante* closed behind them. Miller had a moment's vertigo, the ship before them suddenly clicking from *ahead* to *down* in his perception, as if they were falling into something.

"You all right?" Naomi asked.

Miller nodded, and Amos passed into the other ship's hatch. One by one, they went in.

The ship was dead. The lights coming off their environment suits played over the soft, almost streamlined curves of the bulkheads, the cushioned walls, the gray suit lockers. One locker was bent out of shape, like someone or something had forced its way out from within. Amos pushed off slow. Under normal circumstances, hard vacuum would have been assurance enough that nothing was about to jump out at them. Right now, Miller figured it was only even money.

"Whole place is shut down," Holden said.

"Might be backups in the engine room," Amos said.

"So the ass end of the ship from here," Holden said.

"Pretty much."

"Let's be careful," Holden said.

"I'm heading up to ops," Naomi said. "If there's anything running off battery, I can—"

"No, you aren't," Holden said. "We aren't splitting up the group until we know what we're looking at. Stay together."

Amos moved down, sinking into the darkness. Holden pushed off after him. Miller followed. He couldn't tell from Naomi's body language whether she was annoyed or relieved.

The galley was empty, but signs of struggle showed here and there. A chair with a bent leg. A long, jagged scratch down the wall where something sharp had flaked the paint. Two bullet holes set high along one bulkhead where a shot had gone wide. Miller put a hand out, grabbed one of the tables, and swung slowly.

"Miller?" Holden said. "Are you coming?"

"Look at this," Miller said.

The dark spill was the color of amber, flaky and shining like glass in his flashlight beam. Holden hovered closer.

"Zombie vomit?" Holden said.

"Think so."

"Well. I guess we're on the right ship. For some value of right."

The crew quarters hung silent and empty. They went through each of them, but there were no personal markings—no terminals, no pictures, no clues to the names of the men and women who had lived and breathed and presumably died on the ship. Even the captain's cabin was indicated only by a slightly larger bunk and the face of a locked safe.

There was a massive central compartment as high and wide as the hull of the *Rocinante,* the darkness dominated by twelve huge cylinders encrusted with narrow catwalks and scaffolds. Miller saw Naomi's expression harden.

"What are they?" Miller asked.

"Torpedo tubes," she said.

"*Torpedo* tubes?" he said. "Jesus *Christ,* how many are they packing?

A million?"

"Twelve," she said. "Just twelve."

"Capital-ship busters," Amos said. "Built to pretty much kill whatever you're aiming at with the first shot."

"Something like the *Donnager?*" Miller asked.

Holden looked back at him, the glow of his heads-up display lighting his features.

"Or the *Canterbury,*" he said.

The four of them passed between the wide black tubes in silence.

In the machine and fabrication shops, the signs of violence were more pronounced. There was blood on the floor and walls, along with wide swaths of the glassy gold resin that had once been vomit. A uniform lay in a ball. The cloth had been wadded and soaked in something before the cold of space had frozen it. Habits formed from years of walking through crime scenes put a dozen small things in place: the pattern of scratches on the floor and lift doors, the spatter of blood and vomit, the footprints. They all told the story.

"They're in engineering," Miller said.

"Who?" Holden said.

"The crew. Whoever was on the ship. All except that one," he said, gesturing at half a footprint that led toward the lift. "You see how her footprints are over the top of everything else. And there, where she stepped in that blood, it was already dry. Flaked instead of smearing."

"How you know it was a girl?" Holden asked.

"Because it was Julie," Miller said.

"Well, whoever's in there, they've been sucking vacuum for a long time," Amos said. "Want to go see?"

No one said yes, but they all floated forward. The hatch stood open. If the darkness beyond it seemed more solid, more ominous, more *personal* than the rest of the dead ship had, it was only Miller's imagination playing tricks. He hesitated, trying to summon up the image of Julie, but she wouldn't come.

Floating into the engineering deck was like swimming into a cave. Miller saw the other flashlights playing over walls and panels, looking for live controls, or else controls that could come alive. He aimed his own beam into the body of the room, the dark swallowing it.

"We got batteries, Cap'n," Amos said. "And… looks like the reactor got shut down. Intentional."

"Think you can get it back up?"

"Want to run some diagnostics," Amos said. "There could be a reason they shut it off, and I don't want to find out the hard way."

"Good point."

"But I can at least get us… some… come *on,* you bastard."

All around the deck, blue-white lights flared up. The sudden

brilliance blinded Miller for a half second. His vision returned with a sense of growing confusion. Naomi gasped, and Holden yelped. Something in the back of Miller's own mind started to shriek, and he forced it into silence. It was just a crime scene. They were only bodies.

Except they weren't.

The reactor stood before him, quiescent and dead. All around it, a layer of human flesh. He could pick out arms, hands with fingers splayed so wide they hurt to look at. The long snake of a spine curved, ribs fanning out like the legs of some perverse insect. He tried to make what he was seeing make sense. He'd seen men eviscerated before. He knew that the long, ropy swirl to the left of the thing were intestines. He could see where the small bowel widened to become a colon. The familiar shape of a skull looked out at him.

But then, among the familiar anatomy of death and dismemberment, there were other things: nautilus spirals, wide swaths of soft black filament, a pale expanse of something that might have been skin cut by a dozen gill-like vents, a half-formed limb that looked equally like an insect and a fetus without being either one. The frozen, dead flesh surrounded the reactor like the skin of an orange. The crew of the stealth ship. Maybe of the *Scopuli* as well.

All but Julie.

"Yeah," Amos said. "This could take a little longer than I was thinking, Cap."

"It's okay," Holden said. His voice on the radio sounded shaky. "You don't have to."

"It's no trouble. As long as none of *that* freaky shit broke the containment, reactor should boot up just fine."

"You don't mind being around… it?" Holden said.

"Honest, Cap'n, I'm not thinking about it. Give me twenty minutes, I'll tell you if we got power or if we have to patch a line over from the *Roci.*"

"Okay," Holden said. And then again, his voice more solid: "Okay, but don't touch any of that."

"Wasn't going to," Amos said.

They floated back out through the hatch, Holden and Naomi and Miller coming last.

"Is that… " Naomi said, then coughed and started again. "Is that what's happening on Eros?"

"Probably," Miller said.

"Amos," Holden said. "Do you have enough battery power to light up the computers?"

There was a pause. Miller took a deep breath, the plastic-and-ozone scent of the suit's air system filling his nose.

"I think so," Amos said dubiously. "But if we can get the reactor up

first… ”

“Bring up the computers.”

“You’re the captain, Cap’n,” Amos said. “Have it to you in five.”

In silence, they floated up—back—to the airlock, and past it to the operations deck. Miller hung back, watching the way Holden’s trajectory kept him near Naomi and then away from her.

Protective and head-shy both, Miller thought. Bad combination.

Julie was waiting in the airlock. Not at first, of course. Miller slid back into the space, his mind churning through everything he’d seen, just like it was a case. A normal case. His gaze drifted toward the broken locker. There was no suit in it. For a moment, he was back on Eros, in the apartment where Julie had died. There had been an environment suit there. And then Julie was there with him, pushing her way out of the locker.

What were you doing there? he thought.

“No brig,” he said.

“What?” Holden said.

“I just noticed,” Miller said. “Ship’s got no brig. They aren’t built to carry prisoners.”

Holden made a low agreeing grunt.

“Makes you wonder what they were planning to do with the crew of the *Scopuli,*” Naomi said. The tone of her voice meant she didn’t wonder at all.

“I don’t think they were,” Miller said slowly. “This whole thing… they were improvising.”

“Improvising?” Naomi said.

“Ship was carrying an infectious something or other without enough containment to contain it. Taking on prisoners without a brig to hold ’em in. They were making this up as they went along.”

“Or they had to hurry,” Holden said. “Something happened that made them hurry. But what they did on Eros must have taken months to arrange. Maybe years. So maybe something happened at the last minute?”

“Be interesting to know what,” Miller said.

Compared to the rest of the ship, the ops deck looked peaceful. Normal. The computers had finished their diagnostics, screens glowing placidly. Naomi went to one, holding the back of the chair with one hand so the gentle touch of her fingers against the screen wouldn’t push her backward.

“I’ll do what I can here,” she said. “You can check the bridge.”

There was a pause that carried weight.

“I’ll be fine,” Naomi said.

“All right. I know you’ll… I… C’mon, Miller.”

Miller let the captain float ahead into the bridge. The screens there

were spooling through diagnostics so standard Miller recognized them. It was a wider space than he'd imagined, with five stations with crash couches customized for other people's bodies. Holden strapped in at one. Miller took a slow turn around the deck. Nothing seemed out of place here—no blood, no broken chairs or torn padding. When it happened, the fight had been down near the reactor. He wasn't sure yet what that meant. He sat at what, under a standard layout, would have been the security station, and opened a private channel to Holden.

"Anything you're looking for in particular?"

"Briefings. Overviews," Holden said shortly. "Whatever's useful. You?"

"See if I can get into the internal monitors."

"Hoping to find…?"

"What Julie found," Miller said.

The security assumed that anyone sitting at the console had access to the low-level feeds. It still took half an hour to parse the command structure and query interface. Once Miller had that down, it wasn't hard. The time stamp on the log listed the feed as the day the *Scopuli* had gone missing. The security camera in the airlock bay showed the crew—Belters, most of them—being escorted in. Their captors were in armor, with faceplates lowered. Miller wondered if they'd meant to keep their identities secret. That would almost have suggested they were planning to keep the crew alive. Or maybe they were just wary of some last-minute resistance. The crew of the *Scopuli* weren't wearing environment suits or armor. A couple of them weren't even wearing uniforms.

But Julie was.

It was strange, watching her move. With a sense of dislocation, Miller realized that he'd never actually seen her in motion. All the pictures he'd had in his file back on Ceres had been stills. Now here she was, floating with her chosen compatriots, her hair back out of her eyes, her jaw clamped. She looked very small surrounded by her crew and the men in armor. The little rich girl who'd turned her back on wealth and status to be with the downtrodden Belt. The girl who'd told her mother to sell the *Razorback*—the ship she'd loved—rather than give in to emotional blackmail. In motion, she looked a little different from the imaginary version he'd built of her—the way she pulled her shoulders back, the habit of reaching her toes toward the floor even in null g—but the basic image was the same. He felt like he was filling in blanks with the new details rather than reimagining the woman.

The guards said something—the security feed's audio was playing to vacuum—and the *Scopuli* crew looked aghast. Then, hesitantly, the

captain started taking his uniform off. They were stripping the prisoners. Miller shook his head.

"Bad plan."

"What?" Holden said.

"Nothing. Sorry."

Julie wasn't moving. One of the guards moved toward her, his legs braced on the wall. Julie, who'd lived through being raped, maybe, or something as bad. Who'd studied jiu jitsu to feel safe afterward. Maybe they thought she was just being modest. Maybe they were afraid she was hiding a weapon under her clothes. Either way, they tried to force the point. One of the guards pushed her, and she latched on to his arm like her life depended on it. Miller winced when he saw the man's elbow bend the wrong way, but he also smiled.

That's my girl, he thought. *Give 'em hell.*

And she did. For almost forty seconds, the airlock bay was a battleground. Even some of the cowed *Scopuli* crew tried to join in. But then Julie didn't see a thick-shouldered man launch from behind her. Miller felt it when the gauntleted hand hammered Julie's temple. She wasn't out, but she was groggy. The men with guns stripped her with a cold efficiency, and when there were no weapons or comm devices, they handed her a jumpsuit and shoved her in a locker. The others, they led down into the ship. Miller matched time stamps and switched feeds.

The prisoners were taken to the galley, then bound to the tables. One of the guards spent a minute or so talking, but with his faceplate down, the only clues Miller had to the content of the sermon were the reactions of the crew—wide-eyed disbelief, confusion, outrage, and fear. The guard could have been saying anything.

Miller started skipping. A few hours, then a few more. The ship was under thrust, the prisoners actually sitting at the tables instead of floating near them. He flipped to other parts of the ship. Julie's locker was still closed. If he hadn't known better, he'd have assumed she was dead.

He skipped ahead.

One hundred and thirty-two hours later, the crew of the *Scopuli* grew a pair. Miller saw it in their bodies even before the violence started. He'd seen holding cells rise up before, and the prisoners had the same sullen-but-excited look. The feed showed the stretch of wall where he'd seen the bullet holes. They weren't there yet. They would be. A man came into the picture with a tray of food rations.

Here it comes, Miller thought.

The fight was short and brutal. The prisoners didn't stand a chance. Miller watched as they hauled one of them—a sandy-haired man—to the airlock and spaced him. The others were put in heavy restraints.

Some wept. Some screamed. Miller skipped ahead.

It had to be in there someplace. The moment when it—whatever it was—got loose. But either it had happened in some unmonitored crew quarters or it had been there from the beginning. Almost exactly one hundred and sixty hours after Julie had gone into the locker, a man in a white jumper, eyes glassy and stance unsure, lurched out of the crew quarters and vomited on one of the guards.

"Fuck!" Amos shouted.

Miller was out of his chair before he knew what had happened. Holden was up too.

"Amos?" Holden said. "Talk to me."

"Hold on," Amos said. "Yeah, it's okay, Cap'n. It's just these fuckers stripped off a bunch of the reactor shielding. We've got her up, but I sucked down a few more rads than I'd have picked."

"Get back to the *Roci,*" Holden said. Miller steadied himself against a wall, pushing back down toward the control stations.

"No offense, sir, but it ain't like I'm about to start pissing blood or anything fun like that," Amos said. "I got surprised more than anything. I start feeling itchy, I'll head back over, but I can get some atmosphere for us by working out of the machine shop if you give me a few more minutes."

Miller watched Holden's face as the man struggled. He could make it an order; he could leave it be.

"Okay, Amos. But you start getting light-headed or anything—I mean *anything*—and you get over to the sick bay."

"Aye, aye," Amos said.

"Alex, keep an eye on Amos' biomed feed from over there. Give us a heads-up if you see a problem," Holden said on the general channel.

"Roger," came Alex's lazy drawl.

"You finding anything?" Holden asked Miller on their private channel.

"Nothing unexpected," Miller said. "You?"

"Yeah, actually. Take a look."

Miller pushed himself to the screen Holden had been working. Holden pulled himself back into the station and started pulling up feeds.

"I was thinking that someone had to go last," Holden said. "I mean, there had to be someone who was the least sick when whatever it was got loose. So I went through the directory to see what activity was going on before the system went dead."

"And?"

"There's a whole bunch of activity that looks like it happened a couple days before the system shutdown, and then nothing for two solid days. And then a little spike. A lot of accessed files and system

diagnostics. Then someone hacked the override codes to blow atmosphere."

"It was Julie, then."

"That's what I was thinking," Holden said. "But one of the feeds she accessed was… Shit, where is it? It was right… Oh. Here. Watch this."

The screen blinked, controls dropping to standby, and a high-res emblem, green and gold, came up. The corporate logo of Protogen, with a slogan Miller hadn't seen before. *First. Fastest. Furthest.*

"What's the time stamp on the file?" Miller asked.

"The original was created about two years ago," Holden said. "This copy was burned eight months ago."

The emblem faded, and a pleasant-faced man sitting at a desk took its place. He had dark hair, with just a scattering of gray at the temples, and lips that seemed used to smiling. He nodded at the camera. The smile didn't reach his eyes, which were as empty as a shark's.

Sociopath, Miller thought.

The man's lips began moving soundlessly. Holden said, "Shit," and hit a switch to have the audio transmitted to their suits. He rewound the video feed and started it over.

"Mr. Dresden," the man said. "I would like to thank you and the members of the board for taking the time to review this information. Your support, both financial and otherwise, has been absolutely essential to the incredible discoveries we've seen on this project. While my team has been point man, as it were, Protogen's tireless commitment to the advancement of science has made our work possible.

"Gentlemen, I will be frank. The Phoebe protomolecule has exceeded all our expectations. I believe it represents a genuinely game-changing technological breakthrough. I know that these kinds of corporate presentations are prone to hyperbole. Please understand that I have thought about this carefully and chosen my words: Protogen can become the most important and powerful entity in the history of the human race. But it will require initiative, ambition, and bold action."

"He's talking about killing people," Miller said.

"You've seen this already?" Holden said.

Miller shook his head. The feed changed. The man faded out, and an animation took his place. A graphic representation of the solar system. Orbits marked in wide swaths of color showed the plane of the ecliptic. The virtual camera swirled out from the inner planets, where Mr. Dresden and board members presumably were, and out toward the gas giants.

"For those of you on the board unfamiliar with the project, eight

years ago, the first manned landing was made on Phoebe," the sociopath said.

The animation zoomed in toward Saturn, rings and planet flying past in a triumph of graphic design over accuracy.

"A small ice moon, the assumption was that Phoebe would eventually be mined for water, much like the rings themselves. The Martian government commissioned a scientific survey more out of a sense of bureaucratic completeness than from expectation of economic gain. Core samples were taken, and when silicate anomalies raised flags, Protogen was approached as cosponsor of a long-term research facility."

The moon itself—Phoebe—filled the frame, turning slowly to show all sides like a prostitute at a cheap brothel. It was a crater-marked lump, indistinguishable from a thousand other asteroids and planetesimals Miller had seen.

"Given Phoebe's extra-ecliptical orbit," the sociopath went on, "one theory has been that it was a body that originated in the Kuiper belt and had been captured by Saturn when it happened to pass through the solar system. The existence of complex silicon structures within the interior ice, along with suggestions of impact-resistant structures within the architecture of the body itself, have forced us to reevaluate this.

"Using analyses proprietary to Protogen and not yet shared with the Martian team, we have determined beyond any credible doubt that what you are seeing now is not a naturally formed planetesimal, but a weapon. Specifically, a weapon designed to carry its payload through the depths of interplanetary space and deliver it safely onto Earth two and one third billion years ago, when life itself was in its earliest stages. And the payload, gentlemen, is this."

The display clicked to a graphic that Miller couldn't quite parse. It looked like the medical text of a virus, but with wide, looping structures that were at once beautiful and improbable.

"The protomolecule first caught our interest for its ability to maintain its primary structure in a wide variety of conditions through secondary and tertiary changes. It also showed an affinity for carbon and silicon structures. Its activity suggested it was not in itself a living thing, but a set of free-floating instructions designed to adapt to and guide other replicating systems. Animal experiments suggest that its effects are not exclusive to simple replicators, but are, in fact, scalable."

"Animal tests," Miller said. "What, they dumped it on a cat?"

"The initial implication of this," the sociopath went on, "is that a larger biosphere exists, of which our solar system is only a part, and that the protomolecule is an artifact of that environment. That alone, I

think you must agree, would revolutionize human understanding of the universe. Let me assure you, it's small beer. If accidents of orbital mechanics had not captured Phoebe, life as we know it would not presently exist. But something else would. The earliest cellular life on Earth would have been hijacked. Reprogrammed along lines contained within the structure of the protomolecule."

The sociopath reappeared. For the first time, smile lines appeared around his eyes, like a parody of themselves. Miller felt a visceral hatred growing in his gut and knew himself well enough to recognize it for what it was. Fear.

"Protogen is in a position to take sole possession of not only the first technology of genuinely extraterrestrial origin, but also a prefabricated mechanism for the manipulation of living systems and the first clues as to the nature of the larger—I will call it *galactic*—biosphere. Directed by human hands, the applications of this are limitless. I believe that the opportunity now facing not only us but life itself is as profound and transformative as anything that has ever happened. And, further, the control of this technology will represent the base of all political and economic power from now on.

"I urge you to consider the technical details I have outlined in the attached. Moving quickly to understand the programming, mechanism, and intent of the protomolecule, as well as its direct application to human beings, will mark the difference between a Protogen-led future and being left behind. I urge immediate and decisive action to take exclusive control of the protomolecule and move forward with large-scale testing.

"Thank you for your time and attention."

The sociopath smiled again, and the corporate logo reappeared. *First. Fastest. Furthest.* Miller's heart was racing.

"Okay. All right," he said. And then: "Fuck *me*."

"Protogen, protomolecule," Holden said. "They had no idea what it does, but they slapped their label on it like they'd made it. They found an alien weapon, and all they could think to do was *brand* it."

"There's reason to think these boys are pretty impressed with themselves," Miller replied with a nod.

"Now, I'm not a scientist or anything," Holden said, "but it seems to me like taking an *alien supervirus* and dropping it into a space station would be a bad idea."

"It's been two years," Miller said. "They've been doing tests. They've been… I don't know what the hell they've been doing. But Eros is what they decided on. And everyone knows what happened on Eros. The other side did it. No research and recovery ships because they're all fighting each other or guarding something. The war? It's a distraction."

“And Protogen is doing… what?”

“Seeing what their toy does when you take it out for a spin is my guess,” Miller said.

They were silent for a long moment. Holden spoke first.

“So you take a company that seems to be lacking an institutional conscience, that has enough government research contracts to almost be a privately run branch of the military. How far will they go for the holy grail?”

“First, fastest, furthest,” Miller replied.

“Yeah.”

“Guys,” Naomi said, “you should come down here. I think I’ve got something.”

Chapter Thirty-Five: Holden

I've found the comm logs," Naomi said as Holden and Miller drifted into the room behind her.

Holden put a hand on her shoulder, pulled it back, and hated that he'd pulled back. A week earlier she'd have been fine with a simple gesture of affection like that, and he wouldn't have been afraid of her reaction. He regretted the new distance between them only slightly less than he would have regretted not saying anything at all. He wanted to tell her that.

Instead, he said, "Find anything good?"

She tapped the screen and pulled up the log.

"They were hard-core about comm discipline," she said, pointing at the long list of dates and times. "Nothing ever went out on radio, everything was tightbeam. And everything was doublespeak, lots of obvious code phrases."

Miller's mouth moved inside his helmet. Holden tapped on his face shield. Miller rolled his eyes in disgust and then chinned the comm link to the general channel.

"Sorry. Don't spend a lot of time in suits," he said. "What've we got that's good?"

"Not much. But the last communication was in plain English," she said, then tapped the last line on the list.

THOTH STATION

CREW DEGENERATING. PROJECTING 100% CASUALTIES. MATERIALS SECURED. STABILIZING COURSE AND SPEED. VECTOR DATA TO FOLLOW. EXTREME CONTAMINATION HAZARD FOR ENTRY TEAMS.

CPT. HIGGINS

Holden read it several times, imagining Captain Higgins watching the infection spread through his crew, helpless to stop it. His people vomiting all over in a vacuum-sealed metal box, even one molecule of the substance on your skin a virtual death sentence. Black filament-covered tendrils erupting from their eyes and mouths. And then that… soup that covered the reactor. He let himself shudder, grateful that Miller wouldn't see it through the atmosphere suit.

"So this Higgins fella realizes his crew is turning into vomit zombies and sends a last message to his bosses, right?" Miller said, breaking into Holden's reverie. "What's this stuff about vector data?"

"He knew they'd all be dead, so he was letting his people know how to catch the ship," Holden replied.

"But they didn't, because it's here, because Julie took control and flew it somewhere else," Miller said. "Which means they're looking for it, right?"

Holden ignored that and put his hand back on Naomi's shoulder with what he hoped was companionable casualness.

"We have tight beam messages and the vector info," he said. "Are they all going to the same place?"

"Sort of," she said, nodding with her right hand. "Not the same place, but all to what appear to be points in the Belt. But based on the changes in direction and the times they were sent, to one point in the Belt that is moving around, and not in a stable orbit either."

"A ship, then?"

Naomi gave another nod.

"Probably," she said. "I've been playing with the locations, and I can't find anything in the registry that looks likely. No stations or inhabited rocks. A ship would make sense. But—"

Holden waited for Naomi to finish, but Miller leaned forward impatiently.

"But what?" he said.

"But how did they know where it would be?" she replied. "I have no incoming comms in the log. If a ship was moving around randomly in the Belt, how'd they know where to send these messages?"

Holden squeezed her shoulder, lightly enough that she probably

didn't even feel it in the heavy environment suit, then pushed off and allowed himself to drift toward the ceiling.

"So it's not random," he said. "They had some sort of map of where this thing would be at the time they sent the laser comms. Could be one of their stealth ships."

Naomi turned around in her chair to look up at him.

"Could be a station," she said.

"It's the lab," Miller broke in. "They're running an experiment on Eros, they need the white coats nearby."

"Naomi," Holden said. " 'Materials secured.' There's a safe in the captain's quarters that's still locked down. Think you can get it open?"

Naomi gave a one-handed shrug.

"I don't know," she said. "Maybe. Amos could probably blast it open with some of the explosives we found in that big box of weapons."

Holden laughed.

"Well," he said. "Since it's probably full of little vials of nasty alien viruses, I'm going to nix the blasting option."

Naomi shut down the comm log and pulled up a general ship's systems menu.

"I can look around and see if the computer has access to the safe," she said. "Try to open it that way. It might take some time."

"Do what you can," Holden said. "We'll get out of your hair."

Holden pushed himself off the ceiling and over to the ops compartment hatch, then pulled himself through, into the corridor beyond. A few moments later, Miller followed. The detective planted his feet on the deck with magnetic boots, then stared at Holden, waiting.

Holden floated down to the deck next to him.

"What do you think?" Holden asked. "Protogen being the whole thing? Or is this another one where it looks like them, so it isn't?"

Miller was silent for the space of two long breaths.

"This one smells like the real thing," Miller said. He sounded almost grudging.

Amos pulled himself up the crew ladder from below, dragging a large metal case behind him.

"Hey, Cap'n," he said. "I found a whole case of fuel pellets for the reactor in the machine shop. We'll probably want to take these with us."

"Good work," Holden said, holding up one hand to let Miller know to wait. "Go ahead and take those across. Also, I need you to work up a plan for scuttling this ship."

"Wait, what?" Amos said. "This thing is worth a *jillion* bucks, Captain. Stealth missile ship? The OPA would sell their grandmothers for this thing. And six of those tubes still have fish in them. Capital-

ship busters. You could slag a small moon with those. Forget their grannies, the OPA would pimp their daughters for that gear. Why the fuck would we blow it up?"

Holden stared at him in disbelief.

"Did you forget what's in the engine room?" he asked.

"Hell, Cap," Amos snorted. "That shit is all frozen. Couple hours with a torch and I can chop it up and chuck it out the airlock. Good to go."

The mental image of Amos hacking the melted bodies of the ship's former crew apart with a plasma torch and then cheerfully hurling the chunks out an airlock tipped Holden over the edge into full-fledged nausea. The big mechanic's ability just to ignore anything that he didn't want to notice probably came in handy while he was crawling around in tight and greasy engine compartments. His ability to shrug off the horrible mutilation of several dozen people threatened to change Holden's disgust into anger.

"Forgetting the mess," he said, "and the very real possibility of infection by what *made* that mess, there is also the fact that someone is desperately searching for this very expensive and very stealthy ship, and so far *Alex can't find the ship that's looking.*"

He stopped talking and nodded at Amos while the mechanic mulled that over. He could see Amos' broad face working as he put it together in his head. *Found a stealth ship. Other people looking for stealth ship. We can't see the other people looking for it.*

Shit.

Amos' face went pale.

"Right," he said. "I'll set the reactor up to slag her." He looked down at the time on his suit's forearm display. "Shit, we've been here too long. Better get the lead out."

"Better had," Miller agreed.

Naomi was good. *Very* good. Holden had discovered this when he'd signed on with the *Canterbury,* and over the course of years, he'd added it to his list of facts, along with *space is cold* and *the direction of gravity is down.* When something stopped working on the water hauler, he'd tell Naomi to fix it, and then never think of it again. Sometimes she'd claim not to be able to fix something, but it was always a negotiating tactic. A short conversation would lead to a request for spare parts or an additional crewman hired on at the next port, and

that would be that. There was no problem that involved electronics or spaceship parts she couldn't solve.

"I can't open the safe," she said.

She floated next to the safe in the captain's quarters, one foot resting lightly on his bunk to stabilize herself as she gestured. Holden stood on the floor with his boot mags on. Miller was in the hatchway to the corridor.

"What would you need?" Holden asked.

"If you won't let me blast it or cut it, I can't open it."

Holden shook his head, but Naomi either didn't see it or ignored him.

"The safe is designed to open when a very specific pattern of magnetic fields is played across that metal plate on the front," she said. "Someone has a key designed to do that, but that key isn't on this ship."

"It's at that station," Miller said. "He wouldn't send it there if they couldn't open it."

Holden stared at the wall safe for a moment, his fingers tapping on the bulkhead beside it.

"What're the chances cutting it sets off a booby trap?" he said.

"Fucking excellent, Cap," Amos said. He was listening in from the torpedo bay as he hacked the small fusion reactor that powered one of the six remaining torpedoes to go critical. Working on the ship's main reactor was too dangerous with the shielding stripped off.

"Naomi, I really want that safe and the research notes and samples it contains," Holden said.

"You don't know that's what's in there," Miller said, then laughed. "No, of course that's what's in there. But it won't help us if we get blown up or, worse, if some piece of goo-coated shrapnel makes a hole in our nice suits."

"I'm taking it," Holden replied, then pulled a piece of chalk from his suit's pocket and drew a line around the safe on the bulkhead. "Naomi, cut a small hole in the bulkhead and see if there's anything that would stop us from just cutting the whole damned thing out and taking it with us."

"We'd have to take out half the wall."

"Okay."

Naomi frowned, then shrugged, then smiled and nodded with one hand.

"All right, then," she said. "Thinking of taking it to Fred's people?"

Miller laughed again, a dry humorless rasp that made Holden uneasy. The detective had been watching the video of Julie Mao's fight with her captors over and over again while they'd waited on Naomi and Amos to finish their work. It gave Holden the disquieting

feeling that Miller was storing the footage in his head. Fuel for something he planned to do later.

"Mars would give you your lives back in exchange for this," Miller said. "I hear Mars is nice if you're rich."

"Fuck rich," Amos said with a grunt as he worked on something below. "They'd build statues of us."

"We have an agreement with Fred to let him outbid any other contracts we take," Holden said. "Of course, this isn't really a contract per se… "

Naomi smiled and winked at Holden.

"So what is it, sir?" she said, her voice faintly mocking. "OPA heroes? Martian billionaires? Start your own biotech firm? What are we doing here?"

Holden pushed away from the safe and kicked out toward the airlock and the cutting torch that waited there with their other tools.

"I don't know yet," he said. "But it sure feels nice to have choices again."

Amos pushed the button again. No new stars flared in the dark. The radiation and infrared sensors remained quiet.

"There's supposed to be an explosion, right?" Holden asked.

"Fuck, yes," Amos said, then pushed the button on the black box in his hand a third time. "This isn't an exact science or anything. Those missile drives are as simple as it gets. Just a reactor with one wall missing. Can't exactly predict… "

"It isn't rocket science," Holden said with a laugh.

"What?" Amos asked, ready to be angry if he was being mocked.

"You know, 'it isn't rocket science,' " Holden said. "Like 'it isn't hard.' You're a rocket scientist, Amos. For real. You work on fusion reactors and starship drives for a living. Couple hundred years ago, people would have been lining up to give you their children for what you know."

"What the fu—" Amos started, but stopped when a new sun flared outside the cockpit window, then faded quickly. "See? Fucking told you it would work."

"Never doubted it," Holden said, then slapped Amos on one meaty shoulder and headed aft down the crew ladder.

"What the fuck was that about?" Amos asked no one in particular as Holden drifted away.

He headed through the ops deck. Naomi's chair was empty. He'd ordered her to get some sleep. Strapped down to loops inset in the deck was the stealth ship's safe. It looked bigger cut out of the wall. Black and imposingly solid. The kind of container in which one kept the end of the solar system.

Holden floated over to it and quietly said, "Open sesame."

The safe ignored him, but the deck hatch opened and Miller pulled himself up into the compartment. His environment suit had been traded in for a stale-smelling blue jumpsuit and his ever-present hat. There was something about the look on his face that made Holden uncomfortable. Even more so than the detective usually made him.

"Hey," Holden said.

Miller just nodded and pulled himself over to one of the workstations, then buckled in to one of the chairs.

"We decided on a destination yet?" he asked.

"No. I'm having Alex run the numbers on a couple of possibilities, but I haven't made up my mind."

"Been watching the news at all?" the detective asked.

Holden shook his head, then moved over to a chair on the other side of the compartment. Something in Miller's face was chilling his blood.

"No," he said. "What happened?"

"You don't hedge, Holden. I admire that about you, I guess."

"Just tell me," Holden said.

"No, I mean it. A lot of people claim to believe in things. 'Family is most important,' but they'll screw a fifty-dollar hooker on payday. 'Country first,' but they cheat on their taxes. Not you, though. You say everyone should know everything, and by God, you put your money where your mouth is."

Miller waited for him to say something, but Holden didn't know what. This speech had the feel of something the detective had prepared ahead of time. Might as well let him finish it.

"So Mars finds out that maybe Earth's been building ships on the side, ones with no flag on them. Some of them might have killed a Martian flagship. I bet Mars calls up to check. I mean, it's the Earth-Mars Coalition Navy, one big happy hegemony. Been policing the solar system together for almost a hundred years. Commanding officers are practically sleeping together. So it must be a mistake, right?"

"Okay," Holden said, waiting.

"So Mars calls," Miller said. "I mean, I don't know for sure, but I bet that's how it starts. A call from some bigwig on Mars to some bigwig on Earth."

"Seems reasonable," Holden said.

"What d'you think Earth says back?"

“I don’t know.”

Miller reached over and flipped on one of the screens, then pulled up a file with his name on it, date stamped from less than an hour before. A recording of video from a Martian news source, showing the night sky through a Martian dome. Streaks and flashes fill the sky. The ticker across the bottom of the feed says that Earth ships in orbit around Mars suddenly and without warning fired on their Martian counterparts. The streaks in the sky are missiles. The flashes are ships dying.

And then a massive white flare turns the Martian night into day for a few seconds, and the crawl says that the Deimos deep radar station has been destroyed.

Holden sat and watched the video display the end of the solar system in vivid color and with expert commentary. He kept waiting for the streaks of light to begin descending on the planet itself, for the domes to fly apart in nuclear fire, but it seemed someone had kept some measure of restraint, and the battle remained in the sky.

It couldn’t stay that way forever.

“You’re telling me that I did this,” Holden said. “That if I hadn’t broadcast that data, those ships would still be alive. Those people.”

“That, yeah. And that if the bad guys wanted to keep people from watching Eros, it just worked.”

Chapter Thirty-Six: Miller

The war stories flowed in. Miller watched the feeds five at a time, subscreens crowding the face of his terminal. Mars was shocked, amazed, reeling. The war between Mars and the Belt—the biggest, most dangerous conflict in the history of mankind—was suddenly a sideshow. The reactions of the talking heads of Earth security forces ran the gamut from calm, rational discussion of preemptive defense to foaming-at-the-mouth denunciations of Mars as a pack of baby-raping animals. The attack on Deimos had turned the moon into a slowly spreading ring of gravel in the moon's old orbit, a smudge on the Martian sky, and with that, the game had changed again.

Miller watched for ten hours as the attack became the blockade. The Martian navy, spread throughout the system, was turning home under heavy burn. The OPA feeds were calling it a victory, and maybe someone thought that was true. The pictures came through from the ships, from the sensor arrays. Dead warships, their sides ripped open by high-energy explosions, spinning out into their irregular orbital graves. Medical bays like the *Roci*'s filled with boys and girls half his age bleeding, burning, dying. Each cycle, new footage came in, new details of death and carnage. And each time some new clip appeared, he sat forward, hand on his mouth, waiting for the word to come. The one event that would signal the end of it all.

But it hadn't come yet, and every hour that didn't bring it gave another sliver of hope that maybe, *maybe* it wasn't going to happen.

"Hey," Amos said. "You slept at all?"

Miller looked up, his neck stiff. Red creases of his pillow still on his cheek and forehead, the mechanic stood in the open doorway of Miller's cabin.

"What?" Miller said. Then: "Yeah, no. I've been… watching."

"Anyone drop a rock?"

"Not yet. It's all still orbital or higher."

"What kind of half-assed apocalypse are they running down there?" Amos said.

"Give 'em a break. It's their first."

The mechanic shook his broad head, but Miller could see the relief under the feigned disgust. As long as the domes were still standing on Mars, as long as the critical biosphere of Earth wasn't in direct threat, humanity wasn't dead. Miller had to wonder what they were hoping for out in the Belt, whether they'd managed to talk themselves into believing that the rough ecological pockets of the asteroids would sustain life indefinitely.

“You want a beer?” Amos asked.

“You’re having beer for breakfast?”

“Figure it’s dinner for you,” Amos said.

The man was right. Miller needed sleep. He hadn’t managed more than a catnap since they’d scuttled the stealth ship, and that had been plagued by strange dreams. He yawned at the thought of yawning, but the tension in his gut said he was more likely to spend the day watching newsfeeds than resting.

“It’s probably breakfast again,” Miller said.

“Want some beer for breakfast?” Amos asked.

“Sure.”

Walking through the *Rocinante* felt surreal. The quiet hum of the air recyclers, the softness of the air. The journey out to Julie’s ship was a haze of pain medication and sickness. The time on Eros before that was a nightmare that wouldn’t fade. To walk through the spare, functional corridors, thrust gravity holding him gently to the floor, with very little chance of anyone trying to kill him felt suspicious. When he imagined Julie walking with him, it wasn’t so bad.

As he ate, his terminal chimed, the automatic reminder for another blood flush. He stood, adjusted his hat, and headed off to let the needles and pressure injectors do their worst. The captain was already there and hooked into a station when Miller arrived.

Holden looked like he’d slept, but not well. There weren’t the bruise-dark marks under his eyes that Miller had, but his shoulders were tense, his brow on the edge of furrowed. Miller wondered whether he’d been a little too hard on the guy. *I told you so* could be an important message, but the burden of innocent death, of the chaos of a failing civilization might also be too much for one man to carry.

Or maybe he was still mooning over Naomi.

Holden raised the hand that wasn’t encased in medical equipment.

“Morning,” Miller said.

“Hey.”

“Decided where we’re going yet?”

“Not yet.”

“Getting harder and harder to get to Mars,” Miller said, easing himself into the familiar embrace of the medical station. “If that’s what you’re aiming for, you’d better do it soon.”

“While there’s still a Mars, you mean?”

“For instance,” Miller agreed.

The needles snaked out on gently articulated armatures. Miller looked at the ceiling, trying not to tense up as the lines forced their way into his veins. There was a moment’s stinging, then a low, dull ache, and then numbness. The display above him announced the state of his body to doctors who were watching young soldiers die miles

above Olympus Mons.

"Do you think they'd stop?" Holden asked. "I mean, Earth has got to be doing this because Protogen owns some generals or senators or something, right? It's all because they want to be the only ones who have this thing. If Mars has it too, Protogen doesn't have a reason to fight."

Miller blinked. Before he could pick his answer—*They'd try to annihilate Mars completely,* or *It's gone too far for that,* or *Exactly how naive are you, Captain?*—Holden went on.

"Screw it. We've got the datafiles. I'm going to broadcast them."

Miller's reply was as easy as reflex.

"No, you aren't."

Holden propped himself up, storm clouds in his expression.

"I appreciate that you might have a reasonable difference of opinion," he said, "but this is still my ship. You're a passenger."

"True," Miller said. "But you have a hard time shooting people, and you are going to have to shoot me before you send that thing out."

"I'm *what?*"

The new blood flowed into Miller's system like a tickle of ice water crawling toward his heart. The medical monitors shifted to a new pattern, counting up the anomalous cells as they hit its filters.

"You are going to have to shoot me," Miller said, slowly this time. "Twice now you've had the choice of whether or not to break the solar system, and both times you've screwed it up. I don't want to see you strike out."

"I think you may have an exaggerated idea of how much influence the second-in-command of a long-distance water hauler actually has. Yes, there's a war. And yes, I was there when it started up. But the Belt has hated the inner planets since a long time before the *Cant* was attacked."

"You've got the inner planets divided up too," Miller said.

Holden tilted his head.

"Earth has always hated Mars," Holden said like he was reporting that water was wet. "When I was in the navy, we ran projections for this. Battle plans if Earth and Mars ever really got into it. Earth loses. Unless they hit first, hit hard, and don't let up, Earth just plain loses."

Maybe it was distance. Maybe it was a failure of imagination. Miller had never seen the inner planets as divided.

"Seriously?" he asked.

"They're the colony, but they have all the best toys and everyone knows it," Holden said. "Everything that's happening out there right now has been building up for a hundred years. If it hadn't been there to start with, this couldn't have happened."

"That's your defense? 'Not my powder keg; I just brought the

match'?"

"I'm not making a defense," Holden said. His blood pressure and heart rate were spiking.

"We've been through this," Miller said. "So let me just ask, why is it you think this time will be different?"

The needles in Miller's arm seemed to heat up almost to the point of being painful. He wondered if that was normal, if every blood flush he had was going to feel the same way.

"This time *is* different," Holden said. "All the crap that's going on out there is what happens when you have imperfect information. Mars and the Belt wouldn't have been going after each other in the first place if they'd known what we know now. Earth and Mars wouldn't be shooting each other if everyone knew the fight was being engineered. The problem isn't that people know too much, it's that they don't know enough."

Something hissed and Miller felt a wave of chemical relaxation swim through him. He resented it, but there was no calling the drugs back.

"You can't just throw information at people," Miller said. "You have to know what it *means*. What it's going to *do*. There was a case back on Ceres. Little girl got killed. For the first eighteen hours, we were all sure Daddy did it. He was a felon. A drunk. He was the last one who saw her breathing. All the classic signs. Hour nineteen, we get a tip. Turned out Daddy owed a lot of money to one of the local syndicates. All of a sudden, things are more complicated. We have more suspects. Do you think if I'd been broadcasting everything I knew, Daddy would still have been alive when the tip came? Or would someone have put it all together and done the obvious thing?"

Miller's medical station chimed. Another new cancer. He ignored it. Holden's cycle was just finishing, the redness of his cheeks speaking as much to the fresh, healthy blood in his body as to his emotional state.

"That's the same ethos they have," Holden said.

"Who?"

"Protogen. You may be on different sides, but you're playing the same game. If everyone said what they knew, none of this would have happened. If the first lab tech on Phoebe who saw something weird had gotten on his system and said, 'Hey, everyone! Look, this is weird,' none of this would have happened."

"Yeah," Miller said, "because telling everyone there's an alien virus that wants to kill them all is a great way to maintain calm and order."

"Miller," Holden said. "I don't mean to panic you, but there's an alien virus. And it wants to kill everyone."

Miller shook his head and smiled like Holden had said something funny. "So look, maybe I can't point a gun at you and make you do

the right thing. But lemme ask you something. Okay?"

"Fine," Holden said. Miller leaned back. The drugs were making his eyelids heavy.

"What happens?" Miller said.

There was a long pause. Another chime from the medical system. Another rush of cold through Miller's abused veins.

"What happens?" Holden repeated. It occurred to Miller he could have been more specific. He forced his eyes open again.

"You broadcast everything we've got. What happens?"

"The war stops. People go after Protogen."

"There's some holes in that, but let it go. What happens after that?"

Holden was quiet for a few heartbeats.

"People start going after the Phoebe bug," he said.

"They start experimenting. They start fighting for it. If that little bastard's as valuable as Protogen thinks, you can't stop the war. All you can do now is change it."

Holden frowned, angry lines at the corners of his mouth and eyes. Miller watched a little piece of the man's idealism die and was sorry that it gave him joy.

"So what happens if we get to Mars?" Miller went on, his voice low. "We trade out the protomolecule for more money than any of us have ever seen. Or maybe they just shoot you. Mars just wins against Earth. And the Belt. Or you go to the OPA, who are the best hope the Belt has of independence, and they're a bunch of crazy zealots, half of 'em thinking we can actually sustain out there without Earth. And trust me, they'll probably shoot you too. Or you just tell everyone everything and pretend that however it comes down, you kept your hands clean."

"There's a right thing to do," Holden said.

"You don't have a right thing, friend," Miller said. "You've got a whole plateful of maybe a little less wrong."

Holden's blood flush finished. The captain pulled the needles out of his arm and let the thin metallic tentacles retract. As he rolled down his sleeve, the frown softened.

"People have a right to know what's going on," Holden said. "Your argument boils down to you not thinking people are smart enough to figure out the right way to use it."

"Has anyone used anything you've broadcast as something besides an excuse to shoot someone they already didn't like? Giving them a new reason won't stop them killing each other," Miller said. "You started these wars, Captain. Doesn't mean you can stop them. But you have to try."

"And how am I supposed to do that?" Holden said. The distress in his voice could have been anger. It could have been prayer.

Something in Miller's belly shifted, some inflamed organ calming enough to slip back into place. He hadn't been aware he'd felt wrong until he suddenly felt right again.

"You ask yourself *what happens,*" Miller said. "Ask yourself what Naomi'd do."

Holden barked out a laugh. "Is that how you make your decisions?"

Miller let his eyes close. Juliette Mao was there, sitting on the couch at her old apartment on Ceres. Fighting the crew of the stealth ship to a standstill. Burst open by the alien virus on the floor of her shower stall.

"Something like it," Miller said.

The report from Ceres, a break from the usual competing press releases, came that night. The governing council of the OPA announced that a ring of Martian spies had been rooted out. The video feed showed the bodies floating out an industrial airlock in what looked like the old docks in sector six. At a distance, the victims seemed almost peaceful. The feed cut to the head of security. Captain Shaddid looked older. Harder.

"We regret the necessity of this action," she said to everyone everywhere. "But in the cause of freedom, there can be no compromise."

That's what it's come to, Miller thought, rubbing a hand across his chin. *Pogroms after all. Cut off just a hundred more heads, just a thousand more heads, just ten thousand more heads, and then we'll be free.*

A soft alert sounded, and a moment later, gravity shifted a few degrees to Miller's left. Course change. Holden had made a decision.

He found the captain sitting alone and staring at a monitor in ops. The glow lit his face from below, casting shadows up into his eyes. The captain looked older too.

"You make the broadcast?" Miller asked.

"Nope. We're just one ship. We tell everyone what this thing is and that we've got it, we'll be dead before Protogen."

"Probably true," Miller said, sitting at an empty station with a grunt. The gimbaled seat shifted silently. "We're going someplace."

"I don't trust them with it," Holden said. "I don't trust any of them with that safe."

"Probably smart."

"I'm going to Tycho Station. There's someone there I… trust."

“Trust?”

“Don’t actively distrust.”

“Naomi think it’s the right thing?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t ask her. But I think so.”

“Close enough,” Miller said.

Holden looked up from the monitor for the first time.

“You know the right thing?” Holden said.

“Yeah.”

“What is it?”

“Throw that safe into a long collision course with the sun and find a way to make sure no one ever, ever goes to Eros or Phoebe again,” Miller said. “Pretend none of this ever happened.”

“So why aren’t we doing that?”

Miller nodded slowly. “How do you throw away the holy grail?”

Chapter Thirty-Seven: Holden

Alex had the *Rocinante* running at three-quarters of a g for two hours while the crew prepared and ate dinner. He would run it back up to three when the break was over, but in the meantime, Holden enjoyed standing on his own two legs at something not too far off from Earth gravity. It was a little heavy for Naomi and Miller, but neither of them complained. They both understood the need for haste.

Once the gravity had dropped from the crush of high acceleration, the whole crew quietly gathered in the galley and started making dinner. Naomi blended together fake eggs and fake cheese. Amos cooked tomato paste and the last of their fresh mushrooms into a red sauce that actually smelled like the real thing. Alex, who had the duty watch, had forwarded ship ops down to a panel in the galley and sat at a table next to it, spreading the fake cheese paste and red sauce onto flat noodles in hopes that the end result would approximate lasagna. Holden had oven duty and had spent the lasagna prep time baking frozen lumps of dough into bread. The smell in the galley was not entirely unlike actual food.

Miller had followed the crew into the galley but seemed uncomfortable asking for something to do. Instead, he set the table and then sat down at it and watched. He wasn't exactly avoiding Holden's eyes, but he wasn't going out of his way to catch his attention. By unspoken mutual agreement, no one had any of the news channels on. Holden was sure everyone would rush back to check the current state of the war as soon as dinner was over, but for now they all worked in companionable silence.

When the prep was done, Holden switched off bread duty and on to moving lasagna-filled cookware into and out of the oven. Naomi sat down next to Alex and began a quiet conversation with him about something she'd seen on the ops screen. Holden split his time between watching her and watching the lasagna. She laughed at something Alex said and unconsciously twisted one finger into her hair. Holden felt his belly tighten a notch.

Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw Miller staring at him. When he looked, the detective had turned away, a hint of a smile on his face. Naomi laughed again. She had one hand on Alex's arm, and the pilot was blushing and talking as fast as his silly Martian drawl would let him. They looked like friends. That both made Holden happy and filled him with jealousy. He wondered if Naomi would ever be his friend again.

She caught him looking and gave him a conspiratorial wink that

probably would have made a lot of sense if he'd been able to hear what Alex was saying. He smiled and winked back, grateful just to be included in the moment. A sizzling sound from inside the oven called his attention back. The lasagna was beginning to bubble and run over the sides of the dishes.

He pulled on his oven mitts and opened the door.

"Soup's on," he said, pulling the first of the dishes and putting it on the table.

"That's mighty ugly-looking soup," Amos said.

"Uh, yeah," Holden said. "It's just something Mother Tamara used to say when she'd finished cooking. Not sure where it comes from."

"One of your *three* mothers did the cooking? How traditional," Naomi said with a smirk.

"Well, she split it pretty evenly with Caesar, one of my fathers."

Naomi smiled at him, a genuine smile now.

"It sounds really nice," she said. "Big family like that."

"Yeah, it really was," he replied, a vision in his head of nuclear fire tearing apart the Montana farmhouse he'd grown up in, his family blowing into ash. If it happened, he was sure Miller would be there to let him know it was his fault. He wasn't sure he'd be able to argue anymore.

As they ate, Holden felt a slow release of tension in the room. Amos belched loudly, then reacted to the chorus of protests by doing it again even more loudly. Alex retold the joke that had made Naomi laugh. Even Miller got into the mood and told a long and increasingly improbable story about hunting down a black market cheese operation that ended in a gunfight with nine naked Australians in an illegal brothel. By the finish of the story, Naomi was laughing so hard she'd drooled on her shirt, and Amos kept repeating "No fucking way!" like a mantra.

The story was amusing enough, and the detective's dry delivery suited it well, but Holden only half listened. He watched his crew, saw the tension falling from their faces and shoulders. He and Amos were both from Earth, though if he had to guess, he'd say Amos had forgotten about his home world the first time he'd shipped out. Alex was from Mars and clearly still loved it. One bad mistake on either side and both planets might be radioactive rubble by the end of dinner. But right now they were just friends having a meal together. It was right. It was what Holden had to keep fighting for.

"I actually remember that cheese shortage," Naomi said once Miller had stopped talking. "Belt-wide. That was your fault?"

"Yeah, well, if they'd only been sneaking cheese past the government auditors, we wouldn't have had a problem," Miller said. "But they had this habit of shooting the other cheese smugglers.

Makes the cops notice. Bad business."

"Over fucking *cheese?*" Amos said, tossing his fork onto his plate with a clack. "Are you serious? I mean, drugs or gambling or something. But cheese?"

"Gambling's legal, most places," Miller said. "And a chemistry class dropout can cook up just about any drug you like in his bathroom. No way to control supply."

"Real cheese comes from Earth, or Mars," Naomi added. "And after they tack on shipping costs and the Coalition's fifty percent in taxes, it costs more than fuel pellets."

"We wound up with one hundred and thirty kilos of Vermont Cheddar in the evidence lockup," Miller said. "Street value that would have probably bought someone their own ship. It had disappeared by the end of the day. We wrote it up as lost to spoilage. No one said a word, as long as everyone went home with a brick."

The detective leaned back in his chair with a distant look on his face.

"My God, that was good cheese," he said with a smile.

"Yeah, well, this fake stuff does taste like shit," Amos said, then added in a hurry, "No offense, Boss, you did a real good job whipping it up. But that's still weird to me, fighting over cheese."

"It's why they killed Eros," Naomi said.

Miller nodded but said nothing.

"How do you figure that?" Amos said.

"How long have you been flying?" Naomi asked.

"I dunno," Amos replied, his lips compressing as he did the mental math. "Twenty-five years, maybe?"

"Fly with a lot of Belters, right?"

"Yeah," Amos said. "Can't get better shipmates than Belters. 'Cept me, of course."

"You've flown with us for twenty-five years, you like us, you've learned the patois. I bet you can order a beer and a hooker on any station in the Belt. Heck, if you were a little taller and a lot skinnier, you could pass for one of us by now."

Amos smiled, taking it as a compliment.

"But you still don't get us," Naomi said. "Not really. No one who grew up with free air ever will. And that's why they can kill a million and a half of us to figure out what their bug really does."

"Hey now," Alex interjected. "You serious 'bout that? You think the inners and outers see themselves as that different?"

"Of course they do," Miller said. "We're too tall, too skinny, our heads look too big, and our joints too knobby."

Holden noticed Naomi glancing across the table at him, a speculative look on her face. *I like your head,* Holden thought at her,

but the radiation hadn't given him telepathy either, because her expression didn't change.

"We've practically got our own language now," Miller said. "Ever see an Earther try to get directions in the deep dig?"

" 'Tu run spin, pow, Schlauch tu way acima and ido,' " Naomi said with a heavy Belter accent.

"Go spinward to the tube station, which will take you back to the docks," Amos said. "The fuck's so hard about that?"

"I had a partner wouldn't have known that after two years on Ceres," Miller said. "And Havelock wasn't stupid. He just wasn't… *from* there."

Holden listened to them talk and pushed cold pasta around on his plate with a chunk of bread.

"Okay, we get it," he said. "You're weird. But to kill a million and a half people over some skeletal differences and slang… "

"People have been getting tossed into ovens for less than that ever since they invented ovens," Miller said. "If it makes you feel better, most of us think you're squat and microcephalic."

Alex shook his head.

"Don't make a lick of sense to me, turnin' that bug loose, even if you hated every single human on Eros personally. Who knows what that thing'll do?"

Naomi walked to the galley sink and washed her hands, the running water drawing everyone's attention.

"I've been thinking about that," she said, then turned around, wiping her hands on a towel. "The point of it, I mean."

Miller started to speak, but Holden hushed him with a quick gesture and waited for Naomi to continue.

"So," she said. "I've been thinking of it as a computing problem. If the virus or nanomachine or protomolecule or whatever was designed, it has a purpose, right?"

"Definitely," Holden said.

"And it seems like it's trying to do something—something complex. It doesn't make sense to go to all that trouble just to kill people. Those changes it makes look intentional, just… not complete, to me."

"I can see that," Holden said. Alex and Amos nodded along with him but stayed quiet.

"So maybe the issue is that the protomolecule isn't smart enough yet. You can compress a lot of data down pretty small, but unless it's a quantum computer, processing takes space. The easiest way to get that processing in tiny machines is through distribution. Maybe the protomolecule isn't finishing its job because it just isn't smart enough to. Yet."

"Not enough of them," Alex said.

“Right,” Naomi said, dropping the towel into a bin under the sink. “So you give them a lot of biomass to work with, and see what it is they are ultimately made to do.”

“According to that guy in the video, they were made to hijack life on Earth and wipe us out,” Miller said.

“And that,” Holden said, “is why Eros is perfect. Lots of biomass in a vacuum-sealed test tube. And if it gets out of hand, there’s already a war going on. A lot of ships and missiles can be used for nuking Eros into glass if the threat seems real. Nothing to make us forget our differences like a new player butting in.”

“Wow,” Amos said. “That is really, really fucked up.”

“Okay. But even though that’s probably what’s happened,” Holden said, “I still can’t believe that there are enough evil people all in one place to do it. This isn’t a one-man operation. This is the work of dozens, maybe hundreds, of very smart people. Does Protogen just go around recruiting every potential Stalin and Jack the Ripper it runs across?”

“I’ll make sure to ask Mr. Dresden,” Miller said, an unreadable expression on his face, “when we finally meet.”

Tycho’s habitat rings spun serenely around the bloated zero-g factory globe in the center. The massive construction waldoes that sprouted from the top were maneuvering an enormous piece of hull plating onto the side of the *Nauvoo.* Looking at the station on the ops screens while Alex finished up docking procedures, Holden felt something like relief. So far, Tycho was the one place no one had tried to shoot them, or blow them up, or vomit goo on them, and that practically made it home.

Holden looked at the research safe clamped securely to the deck and hoped that he hadn’t just killed everyone on the station by bringing it there.

As if on cue, Miller pulled himself through the deck hatch and drifted over to the safe. He gave Holden a meaningful look.

“Don’t say it. I’m already thinking it,” Holden said.

Miller shrugged and drifted over to the ops station.

“Big,” he said, nodding at the *Nauvoo,* on Holden’s screen.

“Generation ship,” Holden said. “Something like that will give us the stars.”

“Or a lonely death on a long trip to nowhere,” Miller replied.

"You know," Holden said, "some species' version of the great galactic adventure is shooting virus-filled bullets at their neighbors. I think ours is pretty damn noble in comparison."

Miller seemed to consider that, nodded, and watched Tycho Station swell on the monitor as Alex brought them closer. The detective kept one hand on the console, making the micro adjustments necessary to remain still even as the pilot's maneuvers threw unexpected bursts of gravity at them from every direction. Holden was strapped into his chair. Even concentrating, he couldn't handle zero g and intermittent thrust half that well. His brain just couldn't be trained out of the twenty-odd years he'd spent with gravity as a constant.

Naomi was right. It would be so easy to see Belters as alien. Hell, if you gave them time to develop some really efficient implantable oxygen storage and recycling and kept trimming the environment suits down to the minimum necessary for heat, you might wind up with Belters who spent more time outside their ships and stations than in.

Maybe that was why they were taxed to subsistence level. The bird was out of the cage, but you couldn't let it stretch its wings too far or it might forget it belonged to you.

"You trust this Fred?" Miller asked.

"Sort of," Holden said. "He treated us well last time, when everyone else wanted us dead or locked up."

Miller grunted, as if that proved nothing.

"He's OPA, right?"

"Yeah," Holden said. "But I think maybe the real OPA. Not the cowboys who want to shoot it out with the inners. And not those nuts on the radio calling for war. Fred's a politician."

"What about the ones keeping Ceres in line?"

"I don't know," Holden said. "I don't know about them. But Fred's the best shot we have. Least wrong."

"Fair enough," Miller said. "We won't find a political solution to Protogen, you know."

"Yeah," Holden said, then began unbuckling his harness as the *Roci* slid into its berth with a series of metallic bangs. "But Fred isn't *just* a politician."

Fred sat behind his large wooden desk, reading the notes Holden had written about Eros, the search for Julie, and the discovery of the stealth ship. Miller sat across from him, watching Fred like an

entomologist might watch a new species of bug, guessing if it was likely to sting. Holden was a little farther away on Fred's right, trying not to keep looking at the clock on his hand terminal. On the huge screen behind the desk, the *Nauvoo* drifted by like the metal bones of some dead and decaying leviathan. Holden could see the tiny spots of brilliant blue light where workers used welding torches on the hull and frame. To occupy himself, he started counting them.

He'd reached forty-three when a small shuttle appeared in his field of view, a load of steel beams clutched in a pair of heavy manipulator arms, and flew toward the half-built generation ship. The shuttle shrank to a point no larger than the tip of a pen before it stopped. The *Nauvoo* suddenly shifted in Holden's mind from a large ship relatively nearby, to a gigantic ship farther away. It gave him a short rush of vertigo.

His hand terminal beeped at almost the same instant that Miller's did. He didn't even look at it; he just tapped the face to shut it up. He knew this routine by now. He pulled out a small bottle, took out two blue pills, and swallowed them dry. He could hear Miller pouring pills out of his bottle as well. The ship's expert medical system dispensed them for him every week with a warning that failing to take them on schedule would lead to horrific death. He took them. He would for the rest of his life. Missing a few would just mean that wasn't very long.

Fred finished reading and threw his hand terminal down on the desk, then rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands for several seconds. To Holden, he looked older than the last time they'd seen each other.

"I have to tell you, Jim, I have no idea what to make of this," he finally said.

Miller looked at Holden and mouthed, *Jim,* at him with a question on his face. Holden ignored him.

"Did you read Naomi's addition at the end?" Holden asked.

"The bit with the networked nanobugs for increased processing power?"

"Yeah, that bit," Holden said. "It makes sense, Fred."

Fred laughed without humor, then stabbed one finger at his terminal.

"That," he said. "That only makes sense to a psychopath. No one sane could do that. No matter what they thought they might get out of it."

Miller cleared his throat.

"You have something to add, Mr. Muller?" Fred asked.

"Miller," the detective replied. "Yes. First—and all respect here—don't kid yourself. Genocide's old-school. Second, the facts aren't in question. Protogen infected Eros Station with a lethal alien disease,

and they're recording the results. Why doesn't matter. We need to stop them."

"And," Holden said, "we think we can track down where their observation station is."

Fred leaned back in his chair, the fake leather and metal frame creaking under his weight even in the one-third g.

"Stop them how?" he asked. Fred knew. He just wanted to hear them say it out loud. Miller played along.

"I'd say we fly to their station and shoot them."

"Who is 'we'?" Fred asked.

"There are a lot of OPA hotheads looking to shoot it out with Earth and Mars," Holden said. "We give them some real bad guys to shoot at instead."

Fred nodded in a way that didn't mean he agreed to anything.

"And your sample? The captain's safe?" Fred said.

"That's mine," Holden said. "No negotiation on that."

Fred laughed again, though there was some humor in it this time. Miller blinked in surprise and then stifled a grin.

"Why would I agree to that?" Fred asked.

Holden lifted his chin and smiled.

"What if I told you that I've hidden the safe on a planetesimal booby-trapped with enough plutonium to break anyone who touches it into their component atoms even if they could find it?" he said.

Fred stared at him for a moment, then said, "But you didn't."

"Well, no," Holden said. "But I could tell you I did."

"You are too honest," Fred said.

"And you can't trust anyone with something this big. You already know what I'm going to do with it. That's why, until we can agree on something better, you're leaving it with me."

Fred nodded.

"Yes," he said, "I guess I am."

Chapter Thirty-Eight: Miller

The observation deck looked out over the *Nauvoo* as the behemoth slowly came together. Miller sat on the edge of a soft couch, his fingers laced over his knee, his gaze on the immense vista of the construction. After his time on Holden's ship and, before that, in Eros, with its old-style closed architecture, a view so wide seemed artificial. The deck itself was wider than the *Rocinante* and decorated with soft ferns and sculpted ivies. The air recyclers were eerily quiet, and even though the spin gravity was nearly the same as Ceres', the Coriolis felt subtly wrong.

He'd lived in the Belt his whole life, and he'd never been anywhere that was designed so carefully for the tasteful display of wealth and power. It was pleasant as long as he didn't think about it too much.

He wasn't the only one drawn to the open spaces of Tycho. A few dozen station workers sat in groups or walked through together. An hour before, Amos and Alex had gone by, deep in their own conversation, so he wasn't entirely surprised when, standing up and walking back toward the docks, he saw Naomi sitting by herself with a bowl of food cooling on a tray at her side. Her gaze was fixed on her hand terminal.

"Hey," he said.

Naomi looked up, recognized him, and smiled distractedly.

"Hey," she said.

Miller nodded toward the hand terminal and shrugged a question.

"Comm data from that ship," she said. It was always *that ship,* Miller noticed. The same way people would call a particularly godawful crime scene *that place*. "It's all tightbeam, so I thought it wouldn't be so hard to triangulate. But… "

"Not so much?"

Naomi lifted her eyebrows and sighed.

"I've been plotting orbits," she said. "But nothing's fitting. There could be relay drones, though. Moving targets the ship system was calibrated for that would send the message on to the actual station. Or another drone, and then the station, or who knows?"

"Any data coming off Eros?"

"I assume so," Naomi said, "but I don't know that it would be any easier to make sense of than this."

"Can't your OPA friends do something?" Miller asked. "They've got more processing power than one of these handhelds. Probably have a better activity map of the Belt too."

"Probably," she said.

He couldn't tell if she didn't trust this Fred that Holden had given them over to, or just needed to feel like the investigation was still hers. He considered telling her to back off it for a while, to let the others carry it, but he didn't see he had the moral authority to make that one stick.

"What?" Naomi said, an uncertain smile on her lips.

Miller blinked.

"You were laughing a little," Naomi said. "I don't think I've ever seen you laugh before. I mean, not when something was funny."

"I was just thinking about something a partner of mine told me about letting cases go when you got pulled from them."

"What did he say?"

"That it's like taking half a shit," Miller said.

"Had a way with words, that one."

"He was all right for an Earther," Miller said, and something tickled at the back of his mind. Then, a moment later: "Ah, Jesus. I may have something."

Havelock met him in an encrypted drop site that lived on a server cluster on Ganymede. The latency kept them from anything like real-time conversation. It was more like dropping notes, but it did the trick. The waiting made Miller anxious. He sat with his terminal set to refresh every three seconds.

"Would you like anything else?" the woman asked. "Another bourbon?"

"That'd be great," Miller said, and checked to see if Havelock had replied yet. He hadn't.

Like the observation deck, the bar looked out on the *Nauvoo,* though from a slightly different angle. The great ship looked foreshortened, and arcs of energy lit it where a layer of ceramic was annealing. A bunch of religious zealots were going to load themselves into that massive ship, that small self-sustaining world, and launch themselves into the darkness between the stars. Generations would live and die in it, and if they were mind-bendingly lucky enough to find a planet worth living on the end of the journey, the people who came out of it would never have known Earth or Mars or the Belt. They'd be aliens already. And if whatever had made the protomolecule was out there to greet them, then what?

Would they all die like Julie had?

There was life out there. They had proof of it now. And the proof came in the shape of a weapon, so what did that tell him? Except that maybe the Mormons deserved a little warning about what they were signing their great-grandkids up for.

He laughed to himself when he realized that was exactly what Holden would say.

The bourbon arrived at the same moment his hand terminal chimed. The video file had a layered encryption that took almost a minute to unpack. That alone was a good sign.

The file opened, and Havelock grinned out from the screen. He was in better shape than he'd been on Ceres, and it showed in the shape of his jaw. His skin was darker, but Miller didn't know if it was purely cosmetic or if his old partner had been basking in false sunlight for the joy of it. It didn't matter. It made the Earther look rich and fit.

"Hey, buddy," Havelock said. "Good to hear from you. After what happened with Shaddid and the OPA, I was afraid we were going to be on different sides now. I'm glad you got out of there before the shit hit the fan.

"Yeah, I'm still with Protogen, and I've got to tell you, these guys are kind of scary. I mean, I've worked contract security before, and I'm pretty clear when someone's hard-core. These guys aren't cops. They're troops. You know what I mean?

"Officially, I don't know dick about a Belt station, but you know how it is. I'm from Earth. There are a lot of these guys who gave me shit about Ceres. Working with the vacuum-heads. That kind of thing. But the way things are here, it's better to be on the good side of the bad guys. It's just that kind of job."

There was an apology in his expression. Miller understood. Working in some corporations was like going to prison. You adopted the views of the people around you. A Belter might get hired on, but he'd never belong. Like Ceres, just pointed the other way. If Havelock had made friends with a set of inner planets mercs who spent their off nights curb-stomping Belters outside bars, then he had.

But making friends didn't mean he was one of them.

"So. Off the record, yeah, there's a black ops station in the Belt. I hadn't heard it called Thoth, but it could be. Some sort of very scary deep research and development lab. Heavy science crew, but not a huge place. I think *discreet* would be the word. Lots of automated defenses, but not a big ground crew.

"I don't need to tell you that leaking the coordinates would get my ass killed out here. So wipe the file when you're done, and let's not talk again for a long, long time."

The datafile was small. Three lines of plaintext orbital notation. Miller put it into his hand terminal and killed the file off the

Ganymede server. The bourbon still sat beside his hand, and he drank it off neat. The warmth in his chest might have been the alcohol or it might have been victory.

He turned on the hand terminal's camera.

"Thanks. I owe you one. Here's part of the payment. What happened on Eros? Protogen was part of it, and it's big. If you get the chance to drop your contract with them, do it. And if they try to rotate you out to that black ops station, don't go."

Miller frowned. The sad truth was that Havelock was probably the last real partner he'd had. The only one who'd looked on him as an equal. As the kind of detective Miller had imagined himself to be.

"Take care of yourself, partner," he said, then ended the file, encrypted it, shipped it out. He had the bone-deep feeling he wasn't ever going to talk to Havelock again.

He put through a connection request to Holden. The screen filled with the captain's open, charming, vaguely naive face.

"Miller," Holden said. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah. Great. But I need to talk to your Fred guy. Can you arrange that?"

Holden frowned and nodded at the same time.

"Sure. What's going on?"

"I know where Thoth Station is," Miller said.

"You know what?"

Miller nodded.

"Where the hell did you get that?"

Miller grinned. "If I gave you that information and it got out, a good man would get killed," he said. "You see how that works?"

It struck Miller as he, Holden, and Naomi waited for Fred that he knew an awful lot of inner planets types fighting against the inner planets. Or at least not for them. Fred, supposedly a high-ranking OPA member. Havelock. Three-quarters of the crew of the *Rocinante.* Juliette Mao.

It wasn't what he would have expected. But maybe that was shortsighted. He was seeing the thing the way Shaddid and Protogen did. There were two sides fighting—that was true enough—but they weren't the inner planets versus the Belters. They were the people who thought it was a good idea to kill people who looked or acted differently against the people who didn't.

Or maybe that was a crap analysis too. Because given the chance to put the scientist from the Protogen pitch, the board of directors, and whoever this Dresden piece of shit was into an airlock, Miller knew he'd agonize about it for maybe half a second after he blew them all into vacuum. Didn't put him on the side of angels.

"Mr. Miller. What can I do for you?"

Fred. The Earther OPA. He wore a blue button-down shirt and a nice pair of slacks. He could have been an architect or a mid-level administrator for any number of good, respectable corporations. Miller tried to imagine him coordinating a battle.

"You can convince me that you've really got what it takes to kill the Protogen station," Miller said. "Then I'll tell you where it is."

Fred's eyebrows rose a millimeter.

"Come into my office," Fred said.

Miller went. Holden and Naomi followed. When the doors closed behind them, Fred was the first to speak.

"I'm not sure exactly what you want from me. I'm not in the habit of making my battle plans public knowledge."

"We're talking about storming a station," Miller said. "Something with damn good defenses and maybe more ships like the one that killed the *Canterbury*. No disrespect intended, but that's a pretty tall order for a bunch of amateurs like the OPA."

"Ah, Miller?" Holden said. Miller held up a hand, cutting him off.

"I can give you the directions to Thoth Station," Miller said. "But if I do that and it turns out you haven't got the punch to see this through, then a lot of people die and nothing gets resolved. I'm not up for that."

Fred cocked his head, like a dog hearing an unfamiliar sound. Naomi and Holden shared a glance that Miller couldn't parse.

"This is a war," Miller said, warming to the subject. "I've worked with the OPA before, and frankly you folks are a lot better at little guerrilla bullshit than at coordinating anything real. Half of the people who claim to speak for you are crackpots who happened to have a radio nearby. I see you've got a lot of money. I see you've got a nice office. What I don't see—what I need to see—is that you've got what it takes to bring these bastards down. Taking out a station isn't a game. I don't care how many simulations you've run. This is real now. If I'm going to help you, I need to know you can handle it."

There was a long silence.

"Miller?" Naomi said. "You know who Fred is, right?"

"The Tycho mouthpiece for the OPA," Miller said. "That doesn't draw a whole lot of water with me."

"He's Fred *Johnson,*" Holden said.

Fred's eyebrows rose another millimeter. Miller frowned and

crossed his arms.

"Colonel Frederick Lucius Johnson," Naomi said, clarifying.

Miller blinked. "The Butcher of Anderson Station?" he said.

"The same," Fred said. "I have been talking with the central council of the OPA. I have a cargo ship with more than enough troops to secure the station. Air support is a state-of-the-art Martian torpedo bomber."

"The *Roci?*" Miller said.

"The *Rocinante,*" Fred agreed. "And while you may not believe it, I actually know what I'm doing."

Miller looked at his feet, then up toward Holden.

"*That* Fred Johnson?" he said.

"I thought you knew," Holden said.

"Well. Don't I feel like the flaming idiot," Miller said.

"It'll pass," Fred said. "Was there anything else you wanted to demand?"

"No," Miller said. And then: "Yes. I want to be part of the ground assault. When we take that station crew, I want to be there."

"Are you sure?" Fred said. " 'Taking out a station isn't a game.' What makes you think *you* have what it takes?"

Miller shrugged.

"One thing it takes is the coordinates," Miller said. "I have got those."

Fred laughed. "Mr. Miller. If you'd like to go down to this station and have whatever's waiting for us down there try to kill you along with the rest of us, I won't stand in your way."

"Thanks," Miller said. He pulled up his hand terminal and sent the plaintext coordinates to Fred. "There you go. My source is solid, but he's not working from firsthand data. We should confirm before we commit."

"I'm not an amateur," Colonel Fred Johnson said, looking at the file. Miller nodded, adjusted his hat, and walked out. Naomi and Holden flanked him. When they reached the wide, clean public hallway, Miller looked to his right, catching Holden's eyes.

"Really, I thought you knew," Holden said.

Eight days later, the message came. The cargo ship *Guy Molinari* had arrived, full up with OPA soldiers. Havelock's coordinates had been verified. Something was sure as hell out there, and it appeared to be

collecting the tightbeamed data from Eros. If Miller wanted to be part of this, the time had come to move out.

He sat in his quarters in the *Rocinante* for what was likely the last time. He realized with a little twinge, equal parts surprise and sorrow, that he was going to miss the place. Holden, for all his faults and Miller's complaints, was a decent guy. In over his head and only half aware of the fact, but Miller could think of more than one person who fit that bill. He was going to miss Alex's odd, affected drawl and Amos' casual obscenity. He was going to wonder if and how Naomi ever worked things out with her captain.

Leaving was a reminder of things he'd already known: that he didn't know what would come next, that he didn't have much money, and that while he was sure he could get back from Thoth station, where and how he went from there was going to be improvisation. Maybe there would be another ship he could sign on with. Maybe he'd have to take a contract and save up some money to cover his new medical expenses.

He checked the magazine in his gun. Packed his spare clothes into the small, battered pack he'd taken on the transport from Ceres. Everything he owned still fit in it.

He turned off the lights and made his way down the short corridor toward the ladder-lift. Holden was in the galley, twitching nervously. The dread of the coming battle was already showing in the corners of the man's eyes.

"Well," Miller said. "Here we go, eh?"

"Yep," Holden said.

"It's been a hell of a ride," Miller said. "Can't say it's all been pleasant, but… "

"Yeah."

"Tell the others I said goodbye," Miller said.

"Will do," Holden said. Then, as Miller moved past him toward the lift: "So assuming we all actually live through this, where should we meet up?"

Miller turned.

"I don't understand," he said.

"Yeah, I know. Look, I trust Fred or I wouldn't have come here. I think he's honorable, and he'll do the right thing by us. That doesn't mean I trust the whole OPA. After we get this thing done, I want the whole crew together. Just in case we need to get out in a hurry."

Something painful happened under Miller's sternum. Not a sharp pain, just a sudden ache. His throat felt thick. He coughed to clear it.

"As soon as we get the place secure, I'll get in touch," Miller said.

"Okay, but don't take too long. If Thoth Station has a whorehouse left standing, I'm going to need help prying Amos out of it."

Miller opened his mouth, closed it, and tried again.

"Aye, aye, Captain," he said, forcing a lightness into his voice.

"Be careful," Holden said.

Miller left, pausing in the passageway between ship and station until he was sure he'd stopped weeping, and then making his way to the cargo ship and the assault.

Chapter Thirty-Nine: Holden

The *Rocinante* hurtled through space like a dead thing, tumbling in all three axes. With the reactor shut down and all the cabin air vented, it radiated neither heat nor electromagnetic noise. If it weren't for its speeding toward Thoth station significantly faster than a rifle shot, the ship would be indistinguishable from the rocks in the Belt. Nearly half a million kilometers behind it, the *Guy Molinari* screamed the *Roci*'s innocence to anyone who would listen, and fired its engines in a long slow deceleration.

With the radio off, Holden couldn't hear what they were saying, but he'd helped write the warning, so it echoed in his head anyway. *Warning! Accidental detonation on the cargo ship* Guy Molinari *has broken large cargo container free. Warning to all ships in its path: Container is traveling at high speed and without independent control. Warning!*

There had been some discussion about not broadcasting at all. Because Thoth was a black station, they'd be using only passive sensors. Scanning every direction with radar or ladar would light them up like a Christmas tree. It was possible that with its reactor off, the *Rocinante* could sneak up on the station without being noticed. But Fred had decided that if they were somehow spotted, it would be suspicious enough to probably warrant an immediate counterattack. So instead of playing it quiet, they'd decided to play it loud and count on confusion to help them.

With luck the Thoth Station security systems would scan them and see that they were in fact a big chunk of metal flying on an unchanging vector and lacking apparent life support, and ignore them just long enough to let them get close. From far away, the stations' defense systems might be too much for the *Roci*. But up close, the maneuverable little ship could dart around the station and cut it to pieces. All their cover story needed to do was buy them time while the station's security team tried to figure out what was going on.

Fred, and by extension everyone in the assault, was betting that the station wouldn't fire until they were absolutely certain they were under attack. Protogen had gone to a lot of trouble to hide their research lab in the Belt. As soon as they launched their first missile, their anonymity was lost forever. With the war going on, monitors would pick up the fusion torch trails and wonder what was up. Firing a weapon would be Thoth Station's last resort.

In theory.

Sitting alone inside the tiny bubble of air contained in his helmet,

Holden knew that if they were wrong, he'd never even realize it. The *Roci* was flying blind. All radio contact was down. Alex had a mechanical timepiece with a glow-in-the-dark face, and a to-the-second schedule memorized. They couldn't beat Thoth at high-tech, so they were flying as low-tech as you could get. If they'd missed their guess and the station fired on them, the *Roci* would be vaporized without warning. Holden had once dated a Buddhist who said that death was merely a different state of being, and people only feared the unknown that lay behind that transition. Death without warning was preferable, as it removed all fear.

He felt he now had the counterargument.

To keep his mind busy, he ran through the plan again. When they were practically close enough to spit on Thoth station, Alex would fire up the reactor and do a braking maneuver at nearly ten g's. The *Guy Molinari* would begin spraying radio static and laser clutter at the station to confuse its targeting package for the few moments the *Roci* would need to come around on an attack vector. The *Roci* would engage the station's defenses, disabling anything that could hurt the *Molinari,* while the cargo ship moved in to breach the station's hull and drop off her assault troops.

There were any number of things wrong with this plan.

If the station decided to fire early, just in case, the *Roci* could die before the fight even started. If the station's targeting system could cut the *Molinari*'s static and laser clutter, they might begin firing while the *Roci* was still getting into position. And even if all that worked perfectly, there was still the assault team, cutting their way into the station and fighting corridor to corridor to the nerve center to take control. Even the inner planets' best marines were terrified of breaching actions, and for good reason. Moving through unfamiliar metal hallways without cover while the enemy ambushed you at every intersection was a good way to get a lot of people killed. In training simulations back in the Earth navy, Holden had never seen the marines do better than 60 percent casualties. And these weren't inner planet marines with years of training and state-of-the-art equipment. They were OPA cowboys with whatever gear they could scrape together at the last minute.

But even that wasn't what really worried Holden.

What really worried him was the large, slightly-warmer-than-space area just a few dozen meters above Thoth station. The *Molinari* had spotted it and warned them before cutting them loose. Having seen the stealth ships before, no one on the *Roci* doubted that this was another one.

Fighting the station would be bad enough, even up close, where most of the station's advantages were lost. But Holden didn't look

forward to dodging torpedo fire from a missile frigate at the same time. Alex had assured him that if they could get in close enough to the station, they could keep the frigate from firing at them for fear of damaging Thoth, and that the *Roci*'s greater maneuverability would make it more than a match for the larger and more heavily armed ship. The stealth frigates were a strategic weapon, he'd said, not a tactical one. Holden hadn't said, *Then why do they have one here?*

Holden moved to glance down at his wrist, then snorted with frustration in the pitch black of the ops deck. His suit was powered down, chronometers and lights both. The only system on in his suit was air circulation, and that was strictly mechanical. If something got fouled up with it, no little warning lights would come on; he'd just choke and die.

He glanced around the dark room and said, "Come on, how much longer?"

As if in answer, lights began flickering on through the cabin. There was a burst of static in his helmet; then Alex's drawling voice said, "Internal comms online."

Holden began flipping switches to bring the rest of the systems back up.

"Reactor," he said.

"Two minutes," Amos replied from the engine room.

"Main computer."

"Thirty seconds to reboot," Naomi said, and waved at him from across the ops deck. The lights had come up enough for them to see each other.

"Weps?"

Alex laughed with something like genuine glee over the comm.

"Weapons are coming online," he said. "As soon as Naomi gives me back the targeting comp, we'll be cocked, locked, and ready to rock."

Hearing everyone check in after the long and silent darkness of their approach reassured him. Being able to look across the room and see Naomi working at her tasks eased a dread he hadn't even realized he'd been feeling.

"Targeting should be up now," Naomi said.

"Roger that," Alex replied. "Scopes are up. Radar, up. Ladar, up—Shit, Naomi, you seeing this?"

"I see it," Naomi said. "Captain, getting engine signatures from the stealth ship. They're powering up too."

"We expected that," Holden said. "Everyone stay on task."

"One minute," Amos said.

Holden turned on his console and pulled up his tactical display. In the scope, Thoth Station turned in a lazy circle while the slightly warm spot above it got hot enough to resolve a rough hull outline.

“Alex, that doesn’t look like the last frigate,” Holden said. “Does the *Roci* recognize it yet?”

“Not yet, Cap, but she’s workin’ on it.”

“Thirty seconds,” Amos said.

“Getting ladar searches from the station,” Naomi said. “Broadcasting chatter.”

Holden watched on his screen as Naomi tried to match the wavelength the station was using to target them, and began spraying the station with their own laser comm array to confuse the returns.

“Fifteen seconds,” Amos said.

“Okay, buckle up, kids,” Alex said. “Here comes the juice.”

Even before Alex had finished saying it, Holden felt a dozen pinpricks as his chair pumped him full of drugs to keep him alive during the coming deceleration. His skin went tight and hot, and his balls crawled up into his belly. Alex seemed to be speaking in slow motion.

“Five… four… three… two… ”

He never said *one.* Instead, a thousand pounds sat on Holden’s chest and rumbled like a laughing giant as the *Roci*’s engine slammed on the brakes at ten g’s. Holden thought he could actually feel his lungs scraping the inside of his rib cage as his chest did its best to collapse. But the chair pulled him into a soft gel-filled embrace, and the drugs kept his heart beating and his brain processing. He didn’t black out. If the high-g maneuvering killed him, he’d be wide awake and lucid for the entire thing.

His helmet filled with the sound of gurgling and labored breathing, only some of which was his own. Amos managed part of a curse before his jaw was clamped shut. Holden couldn’t hear the *Roci* shuddering with the strain of her course change, but he could feel it through the seat. She was tough. Tougher than any of them. They’d be long dead before the ship pulled enough g’s to hurt itself.

When relief came, it came so suddenly that Holden almost vomited. The drugs in his system stopped that too. He took a deep breath and the cartilage of his sternum clicked painfully back into place.

“Check in,” he muttered. His jaw hurt.

“Comm array targeted,” Alex replied immediately. Thoth Station’s comm and targeting array was the first item on their target priority list.

“All green,” Amos said from below.

“Sir,” Naomi said, a warning in her voice.

“Shit, I see it,” Alex said.

Holden told his console to mirror Naomi’s so he could see what she was looking at. On her screen, the *Roci* had figured out why it couldn’t identify the stealth ship.

There were two ships, not one large and ungainly missile frigate that they could dance around and cut to pieces at close range. No, that would have been too easy. These were two much smaller ships parked close together to trick enemy sensors. And now they were both firing their engines and splitting up.

Okay, Holden thought. *New plan.*

"Alex, get their attention," he said. "Can't let them go after the *Molinari.*"

"Roger," Alex replied. "One away."

Holden felt the *Roci* shudder as Alex fired a torpedo at one of the two ships. The smaller ships were rapidly changing speed and vector, and the torpedo had been fired hastily and from a bad angle. It wouldn't score a hit, but the *Roci* would be on everyone's scope as a threat now. So that was good.

Both of the smaller ships darted away in opposite directions at full burn, spraying chaff and laser chatter behind them as they went. The torpedo wobbled in its trajectory and then limped away in a random direction.

"Naomi, Alex, any idea what we're facing here?" Holden asked.

"*Roci* still doesn't recognize them, sir," Naomi said.

"New hull design," Alex said over her. "But they're flyin' like fast interceptors. Guessin' a torpedo or two on the belly, and a keel-mounted rail gun."

Faster and more maneuverable than the *Roci,* but they'd be able to fire in only one direction.

"Alex, come around to—" Holden's order was cut short when the *Rocinante* shuddered and jumped sideways, hurling him into the side of his restraints with rib-bruising force.

"We're hit!" Amos and Alex yelled at the same time.

"Station shot us with some sort of heavy gauss cannon," Naomi said.

"Damage," Holden said.

"Went clean through us, Cap," Amos said. "Galley and the machine shop. Got yellows on the board, but nothing that'll kill us."

Nothing that'll kill us sounded good, but Holden felt a pang for his coffeemaker.

"Alex," Holden said. "Forget the little ships, kill that comm array."

"Roger," Alex replied, and the *Roci* lurched sideways as Alex changed course to begin his torpedo run on the station.

"Naomi, as soon as the first one of those fighters comes around on his attack run, give him the comm laser in the face, full strength, and start dropping chaff."

"Yes, sir," she replied. Maybe the laser would be enough to screw up his targeting system for a few seconds.

"Station's openin' up with the PDCs," Alex said. "This'll get a mite

bumpy."

Holden switched from mirroring Naomi's screen to watching Alex's. His panel filled with thousands of rapidly moving balls of light and Thoth station rotating in the background. The *Roci*'s threat computer was outlining the incoming point defense cannon fire with bright light on Alex's HUD. It was moving impossibly fast, but at least with the system doing a bright overlay on each round, the pilot could see where the fire was coming from and which direction it was traveling. Alex reacted to this threat information with consummate skill, maneuvering away from the PDCs' direction of fire in quick, almost random movements that forced the automated targeting of the point defense cannons to adjust constantly.

To Holden, it looked like a game. Incredibly fast blobs of light flew up from the space station in chains, like long and thin pearl necklaces. The ship moved restlessly, finding the gaps between the threads and dodging away to a new gap before the strands could react and touch her. But Holden knew that each blob of light represented a chunk of Teflon-coated tungsten steel with a depleted uranium heart, going thousands of meters per second. If Alex lost the game, they'd know it when the *Rocinante* was cut to pieces.

Holden almost jumped out of his skin when Amos spoke. "Shit, Cap, got a leak somewhere. Three port-maneuvering thrusters are losing water pressure. Going to patch it."

"Copy, Amos. Go fast," Holden said.

"You hang on down there, Amos," Naomi said.

Amos just snorted.

On his console, Holden watched as Thoth Station grew larger on the scope. Somewhere behind them, the two fighters were probably coming about. The thought made the back of Holden's head itch, but he tried to keep focus. The *Roci* didn't have enough torpedoes for Alex to fire shot after shot at the station from far off and hope one made it through the point defense fire. Alex had to bring them in so close that the cannons couldn't shoot the torpedo down.

A blue highlight appeared on the HUD surrounding a portion of the station's central hub. The highlighted portion expanded into a smaller subscreen. Holden could make out the dishes and antennas that made up the comm and targeting array.

"One away," Alex said, and the *Roci* vibrated as her second torpedo was fired.

Holden shook violently in his restraints and then slapped back into his chair as Alex took the *Roci* through a series of sudden maneuvers and then slammed down the throttle to evade the last of the PDC fire. Holden watched his screen as the red dot of their missile streaked toward the station and struck the comm array. A flash blanked out his

screen for a second and then faded. Almost immediately the PDC fire stopped.

"Good sh—" Holden was cut off by Naomi yelling, "Bogey one has fired! Two fast movers!"

Holden flipped back to her screen and saw the threat system tracking both fighters and two smaller and much faster objects moving toward the *Roci* on an intercept course.

"Alex!" Holden said.

"Got it, Chief. Going defensive."

Holden slammed back into his chair again as Alex poured on the speed. The steady rumble of the engine seemed to stutter, and Holden realized he was feeling the constant fire of their own PDCs as they tried to shoot down the pursuing missiles.

"Well, fuck," Amos said almost conversationally.

"Where are you?" Holden asked, then flipped his screen to Amos' suit camera. The mechanic was in a dimly illuminated crawl space filled with conduit and piping. That meant he was between the inner and outer hulls. In front of him, a section of damaged pipe looked like snapped bones. A cutting torch floated nearby. The ship bounced violently, banging the mechanic around in the tight space. Alex whooped over the comm.

"Missiles did not impact!" he said.

"Tell Alex to stop jerking her around," Amos said. "Makes it hard to hang on to my tools."

"Amos, get back to your crash couch!" Naomi said.

"Sorry, Boss," Amos replied with a grunt as he yanked one end of the broken pipe free. "If I don't fix this and we lose pressure, Alex won't be able to turn to starboard anymore. Bet that'll fuck us up good."

"Keep working, Amos," Holden said over Naomi's protests. "But hang on. This is going to get worse."

Amos said, "Roger that."

Holden switched back to Alex's HUD display.

"Holden," Naomi said. There was fear in her voice. "Amos is going to get—"

"He's doing his job. Do yours. Alex, we have to take these two out before the *Molinari* gets here. Get me an intercept on one of them and let's kick its ass."

"Roger that, Cap," Alex said. "Going after bogey two. Could use some help with bogey one."

"Bogey one is Naomi's priority," Holden said. "Do what you can to keep it off of our backside while we kill his friend."

"Roger," Naomi said in a tight voice.

Holden switched back to Amos' helmet camera, but the mechanic

seemed to be doing fine. He was cutting the damaged pipe free with his torch, and a length of replacement pipe floated nearby.

"Strap that pipe down, Amos," Holden said.

"All respect, Captain," Amos said, "but safety standards can kiss my ass. I'm getting this done fast and getting outta here."

Holden hesitated. If Alex had to make a course correction, the floating pipe could turn into a projectile massive enough to kill Amos or break the *Roci. It's Amos,* he told himself. *He knows what he's doing.*

Holden flipped to Naomi's screen as she poured everything the comm system had at the small interceptor, trying to blind it with light and radio static. Then he went back to his tactical display. The *Roci* and bogey two flew toward each other at suicidal speeds. As soon as they passed the point where incoming torpedo fire couldn't be avoided, bogey two launched both his missiles. Alex flagged the two fast movers for the PDCs and kept up his intercept course but didn't launch missiles.

"Alex, why aren't we shooting?" Holden said.

"Gonna shoot his torpedoes down, then get in close and let the PDCs chew him up," the pilot replied.

"Why?"

"We've only got so many torpedoes and no resupply. No call to waste 'em on these munchkins."

The incoming torpedoes arced forward on Holden's display, and he felt the *Roci*'s PDCs firing to shoot them down.

"Alex," he said. "We didn't pay for this ship. Feel free to use it up. If I get killed so you can save ammo, I am going to put a reprimand in your permanent file."

"Well, you put it that way… " Alex said. Then: "One away."

The red dot of their torpedo streaked off toward bogey two. The incoming missiles got closer and closer, and then one disappeared from the display.

Alex said, "Shit," in a flat voice, and then the *Rocinante* slammed sideways hard enough that Holden broke his nose on the inside of his helmet. Yellow emergency lights began rotating on all the bulkheads, though with the ship evacuated of air, Holden mercifully couldn't hear the Klaxons that were trying to sound throughout it. His tactical display flickered, went out, and then came back after a second. When it came back up, all three torpedoes, as well as bogey two, were gone. Bogey one continued to bear down on them from astern.

"Damage!" Holden yelled, hoping the comm was still up.

"Major damage to the outer hull," Naomi replied. "Four maneuvering thrusters gone. One PDC nonresponsive. We've also lost O_2 storage, and the crew airlock looks like it's slag."

"Why are we alive?" Holden asked while he flipped through the

damage report and then over to Amos' suit camera.

"The fish didn't hit us," Alex said. "The PDC got it, but it was close. Warhead detonated and sprayed us down pretty good."

It didn't look like Amos was moving. Holden yelled, "Amos! Report!"

"Yeah, yeah, still here, Captain. Just hanging on in case we get knocked around like that again. I think I busted a rib on one of the hull braces, but I'm strapped down. Good fucking thing I didn't waste time with that pipe, though."

Holden didn't take time to answer. He flipped back to his tactical display and watched the rapidly approaching bogey one. It had already fired its torpedoes, but at close range it could still cut them apart with its cannon.

"Alex, can you get us turned around and get a firing solution on that fighter?" he said.

"Working on it. Don't have much maneuverability," Alex replied, and the *Roci* began rotating with a series of lurches.

Holden switched to a telescope and zoomed in on the approaching fighter. Up close, the muzzle of its cannon looked as big around as a corridor on Ceres, and it appeared to be aimed directly at him.

"Alex," he said.

"Working on it, Chief, but the *Roci*'s hurtin'."

The enemy ship's cannon flared open, preparing to fire.

"Alex, kill it. Kill it *kill it kill it.*"

"One away," the pilot said, and the *Rocinante* shuddered.

Holden's console threw him out of the scope view and back to the tactical view automatically. The *Roci*'s torpedo flew toward the fighter at almost the same instant that the fighter opened up with its cannon. The display showed the incoming rounds as small red dots moving too fast to follow.

"Incom—" he shouted, and the *Rocinante* came apart around him.

Holden came to.

The inside of the ship was filled with flying debris and bits of superheated metal shavings that looked like slow-motion showers of sparks. With no air, they bounced off walls and then floated, slowly cooling, like lazy fireflies. He had a vague memory of one corner of a wall-mounted monitor detaching and bouncing off three bulkheads in the world's most elaborate billiards shot, then hitting him right below

the sternum. He looked down, and the little chunk of monitor was floating a few centimeters in front of him, but there was no hole in his suit. His guts hurt.

The ops console chair next to Naomi had a hole in it; green gel slowly leaked into small balls that floated away in the zero g. Holden looked at the hole in the chair, and the matching hole in the bulkhead across the room, and realized that the round must have passed within centimeters of Naomi's leg. A shudder swept through him, leaving him nauseated in its wake.

"What the fuck was that?" Amos asked quietly. "And how about we don't do it anymore?"

"Alex?" Holden said.

"Still here, Cap," the pilot replied, his voice eerily calm.

"My panel's dead," Holden said. "Did we kill that son of a bitch?"

"Yeah, Cap, he's dead. About half a dozen of his rounds actually hit the *Roci.* Looks like they went through us from bow to stern. That anti-spalling webbing on the bulkheads really keeps the shrapnel down, doesn't it?"

Alex's voice had started shaking. He meant *We should all be dead.*

"Open a channel to Fred, Naomi," Holden said.

She didn't move.

"Naomi?"

"Right. Fred," she said, then tapped on her screen.

Holden's helmet was filled with static for a second, then with Fred's voice.

"*Guy Molinari* here. Glad you guys are still alive."

"Roger that. Begin your run. Let us know when we can limp over to one of the station's docks."

"Roger," Fred replied. "We'll find you a nice place to land. Fred out."

Holden pulled the quick release on his chair's restraints and floated toward the ceiling, his body limp.

Okay, Miller. Your turn.

Chapter Forty: Miller

Oi, Pampaw," the kid in the crash couch to Miller's right said. "Popped seal, you and bang, hey?"

The kid's combat armor was gray-green, articulated pressure seals at the joints and stripes across the front plates where a knife or flechette round had scraped the finish. Behind the face mask, the kid could have been fifteen. His hand gestures spoke of a childhood spent in vacuum suits, and his speech was pure Belt creole.

"Yeah," Miller said, raising his arm. "Saw some action recently. I'll be fine."

"Fine's fine as fine," the kid said. "But you hold to the foca, and neto can pass the air out to you, hey?"

No one on Mars or Earth would have the first clue what you're saying, Miller thought. *Shit, half the people on Ceres would be embarrassed by an accent that thick. No wonder they don't mind killing you.*

"Sounds good to me," Miller said. "You go first, and I'll try to keep anyone from shooting you in the back."

The kid grinned. Miller had seen thousands like him. Boys in the throes of adolescence, working through the normal teenage drive to take risks and impress girls, but at the same time they lived in the Belt, where one bad call meant dead. He'd seen thousands. He'd arrested hundreds. He'd watched a few dozen picked up in hazmat bags.

He leaned forward to look down the long rows of close-packed gimbaled crash couches that lined the gut of the *Guy Molinari.* Miller's rough estimate put the count at between ninety and a hundred of them. So by dinner, chances were good he'd have seen a couple dozen more die.

"What's your name, kid?"

"Diogo."

"Miller," he said, and gave the kid his hand to shake. The high-quality Martian battle armor Miller had taken from the *Rocinante* let his fingers flex a lot more than the kid's.

The truth was Miller was in no shape for the assault. He was still getting occasional waves of inexplicable nausea, and his arm ached whenever the medication level in his blood started thinning out. But he knew his way around a gun, and he probably knew more about corridor-to-corridor fighting than nine-tenths of the OPA rock jumpers and ore hogs like Diogo who were about to go in. It would have to be good enough.

The ship's address system clicked once.

“This is Fred. We’ve had word from air support, and we’re green for breach in ten minutes. Final checks start now, people.”

Miller sat back in his couch. The clicking and chattering of a hundred suits of armor, a hundred sidearms, a hundred assault weapons filled the air. He’d been over his own enough times now; he didn’t feel the urge to do it again.

In a few minutes, the burn would come. The cocktail of high-g drugs was kept on the ragged edge, since they’d be going straight from the couches into a firefight. No point having your assault force more doped than necessary.

Julie sat on the wall beside him, her hair swirling around her like she was underwater. He imagined the dappled light flashing across her face. Portrait of the young pinnace racer as a mermaid. She smiled at the idea, and Miller smiled back. She would have been here, he knew. Along with Diogo and Fred and all the other OPA militia, patriots of the vacuum, she’d have been in a crash couch, wearing borrowed armor, heading into the station to get herself killed for the greater good. Miller knew he wouldn’t have. Not before her. So in a sense, he’d taken her place. He’d become her.

They made it, Julie said, or maybe only thought. If the ground attack was going forward, it meant the *Rocinante* had survived—at least long enough to knock out the defenses. Miller nodded, acknowledging her and letting himself feel a moment’s pleasure at the idea, and then thrust gravity pushed him into his couch so hard that his consciousness flickered, and the hold around him dimmed. He felt it when the braking burn came, all the crash couches spinning to face the new up. Needles dug into Miller’s flesh. Something deep and loud happened, the *Guy Molinari* ringing like a gigantic bell. The breaching charge. The world pulled hard to the left, the couch swinging for the last time as the assault ship matched the station’s spin.

Someone was shouting at him. “Go go go!” Miller lifted his assault rifle, tapped the sidearm strapped to his thigh, and joined the press of bodies making for the exit. He missed his hat.

The service corridor they’d cut into was narrow and dim. The schematics the Tycho engineers had worked up suggested they wouldn’t see any real resistance until they got into the manned parts of the station. That had been a bad guess. Miller staggered in with the other OPA soldiers in time to see an automatic defense laser cut the first rank in half.

“Team three! Gas it!” Fred snapped in all their ears, and half a dozen blooms of thick white anti-laser smoke burst into the close air. The next time a defense laser fired, the walls flashed with mad iridescence, and the smoke of burning plastic filled the air, but no one died. Miller pressed forward and up a red metal ramp. A welding

charge flared, and a service door swung open.

The corridors of Thoth station were wide and roomy, with long swaths of ivy grown in carefully tended spirals, niches every few feet with tastefully lit bonsai. Soft light the pure white of sunlight made the place feel like a spa or a rich man's private residence. The floors were carpet.

The HUD in his armor flickered, marking the path the assault was meant to take. Miller's heart stepped up to a fast, constant flutter, but his mind seemed to grow perfectly still. At the first intersection, a riot barrier was manned by a dozen men in Protogen security uniforms. The OPA troops hung back, using the curve of the ceiling as cover. What suppressing fire there was came in kneecap low.

The grenades were perfectly round, not even a hole where the pin had been pulled. They didn't roll as well on the soft industrial carpet as they would have on stone or tiling, so one of the three went off before it reached the barrier. The concussion was like being hit in the ears with a hammer; the narrow, sealed corridors channeled the blast back at them almost as much as at the enemy. But the riot barrier shattered, and the Protogen security men fell back.

As they all rushed forward, Miller heard his new, temporary compatriots whooping with the first taste of victory. The sound was muffled, as if they were a long way away. Maybe his earpieces hadn't dampened the blast as much as they were supposed to. Making the rest of the assault with blown eardrums wouldn't be easy.

But then Fred came on, and his voice was clear enough.

"Do not advance! Hold back!"

It was almost enough. The OPA ground force hesitated, Fred's orders pulling at them like a leash. These weren't troops. They weren't even cops. They were a Belter irregular militia; discipline and respect for authority weren't natural to them. They slowed. They got careful. So rounding the corner, they didn't walk into the trap.

The next corridor was long and straight, leading—the HUD suggested—to a service ramp up toward the control center. It looked empty, but a third of the way to the curve horizon, the carpeting started to fly apart in ragged tufts. One of the boys beside Miller grunted and went down.

"They are using low-shrapnel rounds and bouncing them off the curve," Fred said into all their ears at once. "Bank-shot ricochet. Stay low, and do exactly as I say."

The calm in the Earther's voice had more effect than his shouting had. Miller thought he might have been imagining it, but there also seemed to be a deeper tone. A certainty. The Butcher of Anderson Station doing what he did best, leading his troops against the tactics and strategies he'd helped create back when he'd been the enemy.

Slowly, the OPA forces moved forward, up one level, and then the next, then the next. The air grew hazy with smoke and ablated paneling. The wide corridors opened into broad plazas and squares, as airy as prison yards, with the Protogen forces in the guard towers. The side corridors were locked down, local security trying to channel them into situations where they could be caught in crossfire.

It didn't work. The OPA forced open the doors, taking cover in display-rich rooms, something between lecture halls and manufacturing complexes. Twice, unarmored civilians, still at their work despite the ongoing assault, attacked them when they entered. The OPA boys mowed them down. Part of Miller's mind—the part that was still a cop and not a soldier—twitched at that. They were civilians. Killing them was, at the very least, bad form. But then Julie whispered in the back of his mind, *No one here is innocent,* and he had to agree.

The operations center was a third of the way up the station's slight gravity well, defended better than anything they had seen so far. Miller and five others, directed by the all-knowing voice of Fred, took cover in a narrow service corridor, keeping a steady suppressing fire up the main corridor toward ops, and making sure no Protogen counterattack would go unanswered. Miller checked his assault weapon and was surprised to see how much ammunition was left.

"Oi, Pampaw," the kid next to him said, and Miller smiled, recognizing Diogo's voice behind the face mask. "Day's the day, passa?"

"I've seen worse," Miller agreed, then paused. He tried to scratch his injured elbow, but the armor plates kept anything satisfying from happening.

"Beccas tu?" Diogo asked.

"No, I'm fine. It's just… this place. I don't get it. It looks like a spa, and it's built like a prison."

The boy's hands shifted in query. Miller shook his fist in response, thinking through the ideas as he spoke.

"It's all long sight lines and locked-down side passages," Miller said. "If I was going to build a place like this, I'd—"

The air sang, and Diogo went down, his head snapping back as he fell. Miller yelped and wheeled. Behind them in the side corridor, two figures in Protogen security uniform dove for cover. Something hissed through the air by Miller's left ear. Something else bounced off the breastplate of his fancy Martian armor like a hammer blow. He didn't think about raising his assault weapon; it was just there, coughing out return fire like an extension of his will. The other three OPA soldiers turned to help.

"Get back," Miller barked. "Keep your fucking eyes on the main

corridor! I'm *on* this."

Stupid, Miller told himself, *stupid to let them get behind us. Stupid to stop and talk in the middle of a firefight.* He should have known better, and now, because he'd lost focus, the boy was…

Laughing?

Diogo sat up, lifted his own assault weapon, and peppered the side corridor with rounds. He got unsteadily to his feet, then whooped like a child who'd just gotten off a thrill ride. A wide streak of white goo stretched from his collarbone up across the right side of his face mask. Behind it, Diogo was grinning. Miller shook his head.

"What the hell are they using crowd suppression rounds for?" he said to himself as much as the boy. "They think this a riot?"

"Forward teams," Fred said in Miller's ear, "get ready. We're moving in five. Four. Three. Two. Go!"

We don't know what we're getting into here, Miller thought as he joined the sprint down the corridor, pressing toward the assault's final target. A wide ramp led up to a set of blast doors done in wood-grain veneer. Something detonated behind them, but Miller kept his head low and didn't look back. The press of bodies jostling in their ragtag armor grew thicker, and Miller stumbled on something soft. A body in Protogen uniform.

"Give us some room!" a woman at the front shouted. Miller pushed toward her, cutting through the crowd of OPA soldiers with his shoulder and elbow. The woman shouted again as he reached her.

"What's the problem?" Miller shouted.

"I can't cut through this bitch with all these dick-lickers pushing me," she said, lifting a cutting torch already glowing white at the edge. Miller nodded and slid his assault rifle into the sling on his back. He grabbed two of the nearest shoulders, shook the men until they noticed him, and then locked his elbows with theirs.

"Just need to give the techs some room," Miller said, and together they waded into their own men, pushing them back. *How many battles, all through history, fell apart at moments like this?* he wondered. *The victory all but delivered until allied forces started tripping over each other.* The welder popped to life behind him, the heat pressing at his back like a hand even in armor.

At the edge of the crowd, automatic weapons gurgled and choked.

"How's it going back there?" Miller shouted over his shoulder.

The woman didn't answer. Hours seemed to pass, though it couldn't have been more than five minutes. The haze of hot metal and aerosolized plastic filled the air.

The welding torch turned off with a pop. Over his shoulder, Miller saw the bulkhead sag and shift. The tech placed a card-thin jack into the gap between plates, activated it, and stood back. The station

around them groaned as a new set of pressures and strains reshaped the metal. The bulkhead opened.

"Come on," Miller shouted, then tucked his head and moved through the new passageway, up a carpeted ramp, and into the ops center. A dozen men and women looked up from their stations, eyes wide with fear.

"You're under arrest!" Miller shouted as the OPA soldiers boiled in around him. "Well, no you're not, but… shit. Put your hands up and back away from the controls!"

One of the men—tall as a Belter, but built solid as a man in full gravity—sighed. He wore a good suit, linen and raw silk, without the lines and folds that spoke of computer tailoring.

"Do what they say," the linen suit said. He sounded peeved, but not frightened.

Miller's eyes narrowed.

"Mr. Dresden?"

The suit raised a carefully shaped eyebrow, paused, and nodded.

"Been looking for you," Miller said.

Fred walked into the ops center like he belonged there. With a tighter set of the shoulders and a degree's shift of the spine, the master engineer of Tycho Station was gone, and the general was in his place. He looked over the ops center, sucking in every detail with a flicker of his eyes, then nodded at one of the senior OPA techs.

"All locked down, sir," the tech said. "The station's yours."

Miller had almost never been present to witness another man's moment of absolution. It was such a rare thing, and so utterly private that it approached the spiritual. Decades ago, this man—younger, fitter, not as much gray in his hair—had taken a space station, wading up to his knees in the gore and death of Belters, and Miller saw the barely perceptible relaxation in his jaw, the opening of his chest that meant that burden had lifted. Maybe it wasn't gone, but it was near enough. It was more than most people managed in a lifetime.

He wondered what it would feel like if he ever got the chance.

"Miller?" Fred said. "I hear you've got someone we'd like to talk to."

Dresden unfolded from his chair, ignoring the sidearms and assault weapons as if such things didn't apply to him.

"Colonel Johnson," Dresden said. "I should have expected that a man of your caliber would be behind all this. My name is Dresden."

He handed Fred a matte black business card. Fred took it as if by reflex but didn't look at it.

"You're the one responsible for this?"

Dresden gave him a chilly smile and looked around before he answered.

"I'd say you're responsible for at least part of it," Dresden said. "You've just killed quite a few people who were simply doing their jobs. But maybe we can dispense with the moral finger-pointing and get down to what actually matters?"

Fred's smile reached all the way to his eyes.

"And what exactly would that be?"

"Negotiating terms," Dresden replied. "You are a man of experience. You understand that your victory here puts you in an untenable position. Protogen is one of the most powerful corporations on Earth. The OPA has attacked it, and the longer you try to hold it, the worse the reprisals will be."

"Is that so?"

"Of course it is," Dresden said, waving Fred's tone away with a dismissing hand. Miller shook his head. The man genuinely didn't understand what was going on. "You've taken your hostages. Well, here we are. We can wait until Earth sends a few dozen battleships and negotiate while you look down the barrels, or we can end this now."

"You're asking me… how much money I want to take my people and just leave," Fred said.

"If money's what you want," Dresden said with a shrug. "Weapons. Ordinance. Medical supplies. Whatever it is you need to prosecute your little war and get this over with quickly."

"I know what you did on Eros," Fred said quietly.

Dresden chuckled. The sound made Miller's flesh crawl.

"Mr. Johnson," Dresden said. "*Nobody* knows what we did on Eros. And every minute I have to spend playing games with you is one I can't use more productively elsewhere. I will swear this: You are in the best bargaining position right now that you will ever have. There is no incentive for you to draw this out."

"And you're offering?"

Dresden spread his hands. "Anything you like and amnesty besides. As long as it gets you out of here and lets us return to our work. We both win."

Fred laughed. It was mirthless.

"Let me get this straight," he said. "You'll give me all the kingdoms of the Earth if I just bow down and do one act of worship for you?"

Dresden cocked his head. "I don't know the reference."

Chapter Forty-One: Holden

The *Rocinante* docked with Thoth station on the last gasps from her maneuvering thrusters. Holden felt the station's docking clamps grab the hull with a thud, and then gravity returned at a low one-third g. The close detonation of a plasma warhead had torn off the outer door of the crew airlock and flooded the chamber with superheated gas, effectively welding it shut. That meant they'd be using the cargo airlock at the stern of the ship and spacewalking over to the station.

That was fine; they were still in their suits. The *Roci* had more holes now than the air cycling system could keep up with, and their shipboard O2 supply had been vented into space by the same explosion that killed the airlock.

Alex dropped from the cockpit, face hidden by his helmet, his belly unmistakable even in his atmosphere suit. Naomi finished locking her station and powering down the ship, then joined Alex, and the three of them climbed down the crew ladder to the ship's aft. Amos was waiting there, buckling an EVA pack onto his suit and charging it with compressed nitrogen from a storage tank. The mechanic had assured Holden that the EVA maneuvering pack had enough thrust to overcome the station's spin and get them back up to an airlock.

No one spoke. Holden had expected banter. He'd expected to want to banter. But the damaged *Roci* seemed to call for silence. Maybe awe.

Holden leaned against the cargo bay bulkhead and closed his eyes. The only sounds he could hear were the steady hiss of his air supply and the faint static of the comm. He could smell nothing through his broken and blood-clogged nose, and his mouth was filled with a coppery taste. But even so, he couldn't keep a smile off his face.

They'd won. They'd flown right up to Protogen, taken everything the evil bastards could throw at them, and bloodied *their* noses. Even now OPA soldiers were storming their station, shooting the people who'd helped kill Eros.

Holden decided that he was okay with not feeling any remorse for them. The moral complexity of the situation had grown past his ability to process it, so he just relaxed in the warm glow of victory instead.

The comm chirped and Amos said, "Ready to move."

Holden nodded, remembered he was still in his atmosphere suit, and said, "Okay. Hook on, everyone."

He, Alex, and Naomi pulled tethers from their suits and clamped them to Amos' broad waist. Amos cycled the cargo airlock and flew out the door on puffs of gas. They were immediately hurled away

from the ship by station spin, but Amos quickly got them under control and flew back up toward Thoth's emergency airlock.

As Amos flew them past the *Roci,* Holden studied the outside of the ship and tried to catalog repair requirements. There were a dozen holes in both her bow and aft that corresponded to holes all along the inside of the ship. The gauss cannon rounds the interceptor had fired probably hadn't even slowed appreciably on their path through the *Roci.* The crew was just lucky none of them had found the reactor and punched a hole in it.

There was also a huge dent in the false superstructure that made the ship look like a compressed gas freighter. Holden knew it would match an equally ugly wound in the armored outer hull. The damage hadn't extended to the inner hull, or the ship would have cracked in two.

With the damage to the airlock, and the total loss of their oxygen storage tanks and recycling systems, there would be millions of dollars in damage and weeks in dry dock, assuming they could make it to a dry dock somewhere.

Maybe the *Molinari* could give them a tow.

Amos flashed the EVA pack's yellow warning lights three times, and the station's emergency airlock door cycled open. He flew them inside, where four Belters in combat armor waited.

As soon as the airlock finished cycling, Holden pulled his helmet off and touched his nose. It felt twice its normal size and throbbed with every heartbeat.

Naomi reached out and held his face still, her thumbs on either side of his nose, her touch surprisingly gentle. She turned his head from side to side, examining the injury, then let go.

"It'll be crooked without some cosmetic surgery," she said. "But you were too pretty before anyway. It'll give your face character."

Holden felt a slow grin coming on, but before he could reply, one of the OPA troops started talking.

"Watched the fight, hermano. You guys really kicked some ass."

"Thanks," said Alex. "How's it goin' in here?"

The soldier with the most stars on his OPA insignia said, "Less resistance than expected, but the Protogen security's been fighting for every foot of real estate. Even some of the egg-heads have been coming at us. We've had to shoot a few."

He pointed at the inner airlock door.

"Fred's heading up to ops. Wants you people up there, pronto."

"Lead the way," Holden replied, his nose turning it into *lee da way.*

"How's that leg, Cap?" Amos asked as they walked along the station corridor. Holden realized he'd forgotten about the limp his gunshot to the calf had left him.

"Doesn't hurt, but the muscle doesn't flex as much," he replied. "Yours?"

Amos grinned and glanced down at the leg that still limped from the fracture he'd suffered on the *Donnager* months earlier.

"No biggie," he said. "The ones that don't kill you don't count."

Holden started to reply, then stopped when the group rounded a corner into a slaughterhouse. They were clearly coming up behind the assault team, because now the corridor floor was littered with bodies, the walls with bullet holes and scorch marks. To his relief, Holden saw a lot more bodies in Protogen security armor than in OPA gear. But there were enough dead Belters on the floor to make his stomach twist. When he passed a dead man in a lab coat, he had to stop himself from spitting on the floor. The security guys had maybe made a bad decision in going to work for the wrong team, but the scientists on this station had killed a million and a half people just to see what would happen. They couldn't be dead enough for Holden's comfort.

Something tugged at him, and he paused. Lying next to the dead scientist was what looked like a kitchen knife.

"Huh," Holden said. "He didn't come at you guys with that, did he?"

"Yeah, crazy, no?" said one of their escorts. "I heard of bringing a knife to a gunfight, but… "

"Ops is up ahead," said the ranking trooper. "General's waiting."

Holden entered the stations' ops center and saw Fred, Miller, a bunch of OPA troops, and one stranger in an expensive-looking suit. A line of technicians and operations staff in Protogen uniform had their wrists cuffed and were being led away. The room was covered deck to ceiling in screens and monitors, most of which were spooling text data too fast to read.

"Let me get this straight," Fred was saying. "You'll give me all the

kingdoms of the Earth if I just bow down and do one act of worship for you?"

"I don't know the reference," the stranger said.

Whatever else they were about to say stopped when Miller noticed Holden and tapped Fred on the shoulder. Holden could swear that the detective gave him a warm smile, though on his dour face it was hard to tell.

"Jim," Fred said, then gestured for him to come closer. He was reading a matte black business card. "Meet Antony Dresden, executive VP of bio research for Protogen, and the architect of the Eros project."

The asshole in the suit actually reached out like he was going to shake hands. Holden ignored him.

"Fred," he said. "Casualties?"

"Shockingly low."

"Half their security had non-lethals," Miller said. "Riot control. Sticky rounds. Like that."

Holden nodded and then shook his head and frowned.

"I saw a lot of Protogen security bodies out there in the corridor. Why have so many guys and then give them weapons that can't repel boarders?"

"Good question," Miller agreed.

Dresden chuckled.

"This is what I mean, Mr. Johnson," Dresden said. He turned to Holden. "Jim? Well then, Jim. The fact that you don't understand this station's security needs tells me that you have no idea what you've become involved with. And I think you know that as well as I do. As I was saying to Fred here—"

"Antony, you need to shut the fuck up," Holden said, surprised by the sudden flush of anger. Dresden looked disappointed.

The bastard had no right to be comfortable. Condescending. Holden wanted the man terrified, begging for his life, not sneering behind his cultured accent.

"Amos, if he talks to me again without being told to, break his jaw."

"My pleasure, Captain," Amos said, and took half a step forward.

Dresden smirked at the ham-fisted threat but kept his mouth shut.

"What do we know?" Holden asked, aiming the question at Fred.

"We know the Eros data is coming here, and we know this piece of shit is in charge. We'll know more once we've taken the place apart."

Holden turned to look at Dresden again, taking in the blue blood European good looks, the gym-sculpted physique, the expensive haircut. Even now, surrounded by men with guns, Dresden managed to look like he was in charge. Holden could imagine him glancing down at his watch and wondering how much more of his expensive time this boarding party was going to take.

Holden said, “I need to ask him something.”

Fred nodded. “You earned it.”

“Why?” Holden asked. “I want to know why.”

Dresden’s smile was almost pitying, and he stuck his hands into his pockets as casually as a man talking sports at a dockside bar.

“ ‘Why’ is a very big question,” Dresden said. “Because God wanted it that way? Or perhaps you want to narrow it for me.”

“Why Eros?”

“Well, Jim—”

“You can call me Captain Holden. I’m the guy that found your lost ship, so I’ve seen the video from Phoebe. I know what the protomolecule is.”

“Really!” Dresden said, his smile becoming half a degree more genuine. “I have you to thank for turning the viral agent over to us on Eros. Losing the *Anubis* was going to put our timeline back months. Finding the infected body already there on the station was a godsend.”

I knew it. I fucking knew it, Holden thought. Out loud, he said, “Why?”

“You know what the agent is,” Dresden said, at a loss for the first time since Holden had come into the room. “I don’t know what more I can tell you. This is the most important thing to ever happen to the human race. It’s simultaneously proof that we are not alone in the universe, and our ticket out of the limitations that bind us to our little bubbles of rock and air.”

“You aren’t answering me,” Holden said, hating the way his broken nose made his voice slightly comical when he wanted to be threatening. “I want to know *why* you killed a million and a half people.”

Fred cleared his throat, but he didn’t interrupt. Dresden looked from Holden to the colonel and back again.

“I *am* answering, Captain. A million and a half people is small potatoes. What we’re working with here is bigger than that,” Dresden said, then moved over to a chair and sat down, pulling up his pants leg as he crossed his knees, so as not to stretch the fabric. “Are you familiar with Genghis Khan?”

“What?” Holden and Fred said at almost the same instant. Miller only stared at Dresden with a blank expression, tapping the barrel of his pistol against his own armored thigh.

“Genghis Khan. There are some historians who claim that Genghis Kahn killed or displaced one quarter of the total human population of Earth during his conquest,” Dresden said. “He did that in pursuit of an empire that would begin falling apart as soon as he died. In today’s scale, that would mean killing nearly ten billion people in order to affect a generation. A generation and a half. Eros isn’t even a rounding

error by comparison."

"You really don't care," Fred said, his voice quiet.

"And unlike Khan, we aren't doing it to build a brief empire. I know what you think. That we're trying to aggrandize ourselves. Grab power."

"You don't want to?" Holden said.

"Of course we do." Dresden's voice was cutting. "But you're thinking too small. Building humanity's greatest empire is like building the world's largest anthill. Insignificant. There is a civilization out there that built the protomolecule and hurled it at us over two billion years ago. They were *already* gods at that point. What have they become since then? With another two billion years to advance?"

With a growing dread, Holden listened to Dresden speak. This speech had the air of something spoken before. Perhaps many times. And it had worked. It had convinced powerful people. It was why Protogen had stealth ships from the Earth shipyards and seemingly limitless behind-the-scenes support.

"We have a terrifying amount of catching up to do, gentlemen," Dresden was saying. "But fortunately we have the tool of our enemy to use in doing it."

"Catching up?" a soldier to Holden's left said. Dresden nodded at the man and smiled.

"The protomolecule can alter the host organism at the molecular level; it can create genetic change on the fly. Not just DNA, but any stable replicator. But it is only a machine. It doesn't think. It follows instructions. If we learn how to alter that programming, then *we* become the architects of that change."

Holden interrupted. "If it was supposed to wipe out life on Earth and replace it with whatever the protomolecule's creators wanted, why turn it loose?"

"Excellent question," Dresden said, holding up one finger like a college professor about to deliver a lecture. "The protomolecule doesn't come with a user's manual. In fact, we've never before been able to actually watch it carry out its program. The molecule requires significant mass before it develops enough processing power to fulfill its directives. Whatever they are."

Dresden pointed at the screens covered with data around them.

"We are going to watch it at work. See what it intends to do. How it goes about doing it. And, hopefully, learn how to change that program in the process."

"You could do that with a vat of bacteria," Holden said.

"I'm not interested in remaking bacteria," Dresden said.

"You're fucking insane," Amos said, and took another step toward

Dresden. Holden put a hand on the big mechanic's shoulder.

"So," Holden said. "You figure out how the bug works, and then what?"

"Then *everything*. Belters who can work outside a ship without wearing a suit. Humans capable of sleeping for hundreds of years at a time flying colony ships to the stars. No longer being bound to the millions of years of evolution inside one atmosphere of pressure at one g, slaves to oxygen and water. We decide what we want to be, and we reprogram ourselves to be that. That's what the protomolecule gives us."

Dresden had stood back up as he'd delivered this speech, his face shining with the zeal of a prophet.

"What we are doing is the best and only hope of humanity's survival. When we go out there, we will be facing *gods*."

"And if we don't go out?" Fred asked. He sounded thoughtful.

"They've already fired a doomsday weapon at us once," Dresden said.

The room was silent for a moment. Holden felt his certainty slip. He hated everything about Dresden's argument, but he couldn't quite see his way past it. He knew in his bones that something about it was dead wrong, but he couldn't find the words.

Naomi's voice startled him.

"Did it convince them?" she asked.

"Excuse me?" Dresden said.

"The scientists. The technicians. Everyone you needed to make it happen. They actually had to do this. They had to watch the video of people dying all over Eros. They had to design those radioactive murder chambers. So unless you managed to round up every serial killer in the solar system and send them through a postgraduate program, how did you do this?"

"We modified our science team to remove ethical restraints."

Half a dozen clues clicked into place in Holden's head.

"Sociopaths," he said. "You turned them into sociopaths."

"High-functioning sociopaths," Dresden said with a nod. He seemed pleased to explain it. "And extremely curious ones. As long as we kept them supplied with interesting problems to solve and unlimited resources, they remained quite content."

"And a big security team armed with riot control rounds for when they aren't," Fred said.

"Yes, there are occasional issues," Dresden said. He looked around, the slightest frown creasing his forehead. "I know. You think it's monstrous, but I am saving the human *race*. I am giving humanity the *stars*. You disapprove? Fine. Let me ask you this. Can you save Eros? Right now."

“No,” Fred said, “but we can—”

“Waste the data,” Dresden said. “You can make certain that every man, woman, and child who died on Eros died for nothing.”

The room was silent. Fred was frowning, his arms crossed. Holden understood the struggle going on in the man’s mind. Everything Dresden said was repulsive and eerie and rang too much of the truth.

“Or,” Dresden said, “we can negotiate a price, you can go on your way, and I can—”

“Okay. That’s enough,” Miller said, speaking for the first time since Dresden had begun his pitch. Holden glanced over at the detective. His flat expression had gone stony. He wasn’t tapping the barrel of his pistol against his leg.

Oh, shit.

Chapter Forty-Two: Miller

Dresden didn't see it coming. Even as Miller raised the pistol, the man's eyes didn't register a threat. All he saw was Miller with an object in his hand that happened to be a gun. A dog would have known to be scared, but not Dresden.

"Miller!" Holden shouted from a great distance. "Don't!"

Pulling the trigger was simple. A soft click, the bounce of metal against his glove-cushioned palm, and then again two more times. Dresden's head snapped back, blooming red. Blood spattered a wide screen, obscuring the data stream. Miller stepped close, fired two more rounds into Dresden's chest, considered for a moment, then holstered the pistol.

The room was silent. The OPA soldiers were all looking at each other or at Miller, surprised, even after the press of the assault, by the sudden violence. Naomi and Amos were looking at Holden, and the captain was staring at the corpse. Holden's injured face was set as a mask; fury, outrage, maybe even despair. Miller understood that. Doing the obvious thing still wasn't natural for Holden. There had been a time when it hadn't come so easily for Miller either.

Only Fred didn't flinch or look nervous. The colonel didn't smile or frown, and he didn't look away.

"What the fuck was that?" Holden said through his blood-plugged nose. "You shot him in cold blood!"

"Yeah," Miller said.

Holden shook his head. "What about a trial? What about justice? You just decide, and that's the way it goes?"

"I'm a cop," Miller said, surprised by the apology in his voice.

"Are you even human anymore?"

"All right, gentlemen!" Fred said, his voice booming out in the quiet. "Show's over. Let's get back to work. I want the decryption team in here. We've got prisoners to evacuate and a station to strip down."

Holden looked from Fred to Miller to the still-dying Dresden. His jaw was set with rage.

"Hey, Miller," Holden said.

"Yeah?" Miller said softly. He knew what was coming.

"Find your own ride home," the captain of the *Rocinante* said, then spun and stalked out of the room, his crew following. Miller watched them walk away. Regret tapped gently at his heart, but there was nothing to be done about it. The broken bulkhead seemed to swallow them. Miller turned to Fred.

“Hitch a lift?”

“You’re wearing our colors,” Fred said. “We’ll get you as far as Tycho.”

“I appreciate that,” Miller said. Then, a moment later: “You know it had to be done.”

Fred didn’t reply. There wasn’t anything to say.

Thoth Station was injured, but not dead. Not yet. Word of the sociopathic crew spread fast, and the OPA forces took the warning to heart. The occupation and control phase of the attack lasted forty hours instead of the twenty that it would have taken with normal prisoners. With humans. Miller did what he could with prisoner control.

The OPA kids were well intentioned, but most of them had never worked with captive populations before. They didn’t know how to cuff someone at the wrist and elbow so that the perp couldn’t get his hands out in front to strangle them. They didn’t know how to restrain someone with a length of cord around the neck so that the prisoner couldn’t choke himself to death, by accident or intentionally. Half of them didn’t even know how to pat someone down. Miller knew all of it like a game he’d played since childhood. In five hours, he found twenty hidden blades on the science crew alone. He hardly had to think about it.

A second wave of transport ships arrived: personnel haulers that looked ready to spill their air out into the vacuum if you spat on them, salvage trawlers already dismantling the shielding and superstructure of the station, supply ships boxing and packing the precious equipment and looting the pharmacies and food banks. By the time news of the assault reached Earth, the station would be stripped to a skeleton and its people hidden away in unlicensed prison cells throughout the Belt.

Protogen would know sooner, of course. They had outposts much closer than the inner planets. There was a calculus of response time and possible gain. The mathematics of piracy and war. Miller knew it, but he didn’t let it worry him. Those were decisions for Fred and his attachés to make. Miller had taken more than enough initiative for one day.

Posthuman.

It was a word that came up in the media every five or six years, and

it meant different things every time. Neural regrowth hormone? Posthuman. Sex robots with inbuilt pseudo intelligence? Posthuman. Self-optimizing network routing? Posthuman. It was a word from advertising copy, breathless and empty, and all he'd ever thought it really meant was that the people using it had a limited imagination about what exactly humans were capable of.

Now, as he escorted a dozen captives in Protogen uniforms to a docked transport heading God-knew-where, the word was taking on new meaning.

Are you even human anymore?

All *posthuman* meant, literally speaking, was what you were when you weren't human anymore. Protomolecule aside, Protogen aside, Dresden and his Mengele-as-Genghis-Khan self-righteous fantasies aside, Miller thought that maybe he'd been ahead of the curve all along. Maybe he'd been posthuman for years.

The min-max point came forty hours later, and it was time to go. The OPA had skeletonized the station, and it was time to get out before anyone came along with vengeance in mind. Miller sat in a crash couch, his blood dancing with spent amphetamines and his mind slipping into and out of exhaustion psychosis. The thrust gravity was like a pillow over his face. He was vaguely aware that he was weeping. It didn't mean anything.

In Miller's haze, Dresden was talking again, pouring out promises and lies, half-truths and visions. Miller could see the words themselves like a dark smoke, coalescing into the spilling black filament of the protomolecule. The threads of it were reaching toward Holden, Amos, Naomi. He tried to find his gun, to stop it, to do the obvious thing. His despairing shout woke him, and he remembered he'd already won.

Julie sat beside him, her hand cool against his forehead. Her smile was gentle, understanding. Forgiving.

Sleep, she said, and his mind fell into the deep black.

"Oi, Pampaw," Diogo said. "Acima and out, sabez?"

It was Miller's tenth morning back on Tycho, his seventh hot-bunking in Diogo's closet-sized apartment. He could tell from the buzz in the boy's voice it would have to be one of the last. Fish and company start to smell after three days. He rolled off the thin bed, ran fingers through his hair, and nodded. Diogo stripped down and crawled into the bed without speaking. He stank of liquor and cheap

tub-grown marijuana.

Miller's terminal told him that the second shift had ended two hours before, the third shift halfway into its morning. He gathered his things in his suitcase, turned off the lights on Diogo's already snoring form, and trundled out to the public showers to spend a few of his remaining credits trying to look less homeless.

The pleasant surprise of his return to Tycho Station was the boost of money in his account. The OPA, meaning Fred Johnson, had paid him for his time on Thoth. He hadn't asked for it, and there was part of him that wanted to turn the payment down. If there had been an alternative, he might have. Since there wasn't, he tried to stretch the funds out as far as they would go and appreciate the irony. He and Captain Shaddid were on the same payroll after all.

For the first few days after his return to Tycho, Miller had expected to see the attack on Thoth in the newsfeeds. EARTH CORPORATION LOSES RESEARCH STATION TO CRAZED BELTERS, or some such. He should have been finding a job or a place to sleep that wasn't charity. He meant to. But the hours seemed to dissolve as he sat in the bar or the lounges, watching the screens for just a few more minutes.

The Martian navy had suffered a series of harassing attacks by Belters. A half ton of super-accelerated gravel had forced two of their battleships to change course. A slowdown in water harvesting on Saturn's rings was either an illegal work stoppage, and therefore treasonous, or the natural response to increased security needs. Two Earth-owned mining operations had been attacked by either Mars or the OPA. Four hundred people were dead. Earth's blockade of Mars was entering its third month. A coalition of scientists and terraforming specialists were screaming that the cascading processes were in danger, and that while the war would be over in a year or two, the loss of supplies would set the terraforming effort back generations. Everyone blamed everyone else for Eros. Thoth station didn't exist.

It would, though.

With most of the Martian navy still in the outer planets, Earth's siege was a brittle thing. Time was getting short. Either the Martians would go home and try facing down the somewhat older, somewhat slower, but more numerous ships of Earth, or they'd go straight for the planet itself. Earth was still the source of a thousand things that couldn't be grown elsewhere, but if someone got happy or cocksure or desperate, it wouldn't take much to start dropping rocks down the gravity wells.

All of it as a distraction.

There was an old joke. Miller didn't remember where he'd heard it. Girl's at her own father's funeral, meets this really cute guy. They talk, hit it off, but he leaves before she can get his number. Girl doesn't

know how to track the guy down.

So a week later, she kills her mom.

Big laugh.

It was the logic of Protogen, of Dresden, of Thoth. *Here is the problem,* they said to themselves, *and there is the solution.* That it was drowned in innocent blood was as trivial as the font the reports were printed in. They had disconnected themselves from humanity. Shut off the cell clusters in their brains that made life besides their own sacred. Or valuable. Or worth saving. All it had cost them was every human connection.

Funny how familiar that sounded.

The guy who walked into the bar and nodded to Miller was one of Diogo's friends. Twenty years old or maybe a little south of that. A veteran of Thoth Station, just like Miller. He didn't remember the kid's name, but he'd seen him around often enough to know that the way he held himself was different than usual. Tight-wound. Miller tapped the mute on his terminal's newsfeed and made his way over.

"Hey," he said, and the kid looked up sharply. The face was tense, but a softer, intentional ease tried to mask it. It was just Diogo's old grandpa. The one, everyone on Thoth knew, who'd killed the biggest dick in the universe. It won Miller some points, so the kid smiled and nodded to the stool beside him.

"All pretty fucked up, isn't it?" Miller said.

"You don't know the half," the kid said. He had a clipped accent. Belter by his height, but educated. Technician, probably. The kid tabbed in a drink order, and the bar offered up a glass of clear fluid so volatile Miller could watch it evaporate. The kid drank it down with a gulp.

"Doesn't work," Miller said.

The kid looked over. Miller shrugged.

"They say drinking helps, but it doesn't," Miller said.

"No?"

"Nope. Sex sometimes, if you've got a girl who'll talk to you after. Or target practice. Working out, sometimes. Liquor doesn't make you feel better. Just makes you not so worried about feeling bad."

The kid laughed and shook his head. He was on the edge of talking, so Miller sat back and let the quiet do his work for him. He figured the kid had killed someone, probably on Thoth, and it was sneaking up on him. But instead of telling the story, the kid took Miller's terminal, keyed in a few local codes, and handed it back. A huge menu of feeds appeared—video, audio, air pressure and content, radiological. It took Miller half a second to understand what he was seeing. They'd cracked the encryption on the Eros feeds.

He was looking at the protomolecule in action. He was seeing

Juliette Andromeda Mao's corpse writ large. For a moment, his imagined Julie flickered beside him.

"If you ever wonder if you did the right thing shooting that guy," the kid said, "look at that."

Miller opened a feed. A long corridor, wide enough for twenty people to walk abreast. The flooring was wet and undulating like the surface of a canal. Something small rolled awkwardly through the mush. When Miller zoomed in, it was a human torso—rib cage, spine, trailing lengths of what used to be intestines and were now the long black threads of the protomolecule—pushing itself along on the stump of an arm. There was no head. The feed output bar showed there was sound, and Miller undid the mute. The high, mindless piping reminded him of mentally ill children singing to themselves.

"It's all like that," the kid said. "Whole station's crawling with… shit like that."

"What's it doing?"

"Building something," the kid said, and shuddered. "I thought you should see it."

"Yeah?" Miller said, his gaze nailed to the screen. "What did I ever do to you?"

The kid laughed.

"Everyone thinks you're a hero for killing that guy," the kid said. "Everyone thinks we should push every last prisoner we took off that station out an airlock."

Probably should, Miller thought, *if we can't make them human again.* He switched the feed. The casino level where he and Holden had been, or else a section very like it. A webwork of something like bones linked ceiling and roof. Black sluglike things a yard long slithered up and between them. The sound was a hushing, like the recordings he'd heard of surf against a beach. He switched again. The port, with bulkheads closed and encrusted with huge nautilus spirals that seemed to shift while he watched them.

"Everyone thinks you're a fucking hero," the kid said, and this time, it bit a little. Miller shook his head.

"Nah," he said. "Just a guy who used to be a cop."

Why should going into a firefight, charging into an enemy station filled with people and automatic systems built to kill you, seem less frightening than talking to people who you shipped with for weeks?

And still.

It was third shift, and the bar at the observation platform was set to imitate night. The air was scented with something smoky that wasn't smoke. A piano and bass dueled lazily with each other while a man's voice lamented in Arabic. Dim lights glowed at the bases of the tables, casting soft shadows up across faces and bodies, emphasizing the customers' legs and bellies and breasts. The shipyards beyond the windows were busy as always. If he went close, he could pick out the *Rocinante,* still recovering from its wounds. Not dead, and being made stronger.

Amos and Naomi were at a table in a corner. No sign of Alex. No sign of Holden. That made it easier. Not easy, but closer. He made his way toward them. Naomi saw him first, and Miller read the discomfort in her expression, covered over as quickly as it appeared. Amos turned to see what she'd been reacting to, and the corners of his mouth and eyes didn't shift into a frown or a smile. Miller scratched his arm even though it didn't itch.

"Hey," he said. "Buy you folks a round?"

The silence lasted a beat longer than it should have, and then Naomi forced a smile.

"Sure. Just one. We've got… that thing. For the captain."

"Oh yeah," Amos said, lying even more awkwardly than Naomi had, making his awareness of the fact part of the message. "The thing. That's important."

Miller sat, lifted a hand for the waiter to see, and, when the man nodded, leaned forward with his elbows on the table. It was the seated version of a fighter's crouch, bent forward with his arms protecting the soft places in his neck and belly. It was the way a man stood when he expected injury.

The waiter came, and then beers all around. Miller paid for them with the OPA's money and took a sip.

"How's the ship?" he asked at last.

"Coming together," Naomi said. "They really banged the hell out of her."

"She'll still fly," Amos said. "She's one tough bitch."

"That's good. When—" Miller said, then tripped on his words and had to start again. "When are you folks shipping out?"

"Whenever the captain says," Amos said with a shrug. "We're airtight now, so could go tomorrow, if he's got someplace he wants to be."

"And if Fred lets us," Naomi said, and then grimaced like she wished she'd kept silent.

"That an issue?" Miller asked. "Is the OPA leaning on Holden?"

"It's just something I was thinking about," Naomi said. "It's nothing.

Look, thanks for the drink, Miller. But I really think we'd better be going."

Miller took a long breath and let it out slow.

"Yeah," he said. "Okay."

"You head out," Amos said to Naomi. "I'll catch up."

Naomi shot a confused look at the big man, but Amos only gave back a smile. It could have meant anything.

"Okay," Naomi said. "But don't be long, okay? The thing."

"For the captain," Amos said. "No worries."

Naomi rose and walked away. Her effort not to look back over her shoulder was visible. Miller looked at Amos. The lights gave the mechanic a slightly demonic appearance.

"Naomi's a good person," Amos said. "I like her, you know? Like my kid sister, only smart and I'd do her if she let me. You know?"

"Yeah," Miller said. "I like her too."

"She's not like us," Amos said, and the warmth and humor were gone.

"That's why I like her," Miller said. It was the right thing to say. Amos nodded.

"So here's the thing. As far as the captain goes, you're dipped in shit right now."

The scrim of bubbles where his beer touched the glass glowed white in the dim light. Miller gave the glass a quarter turn, watching them closely.

"Because I killed someone who needed it?" Miller asked. The bitterness in his voice wasn't surprising, but it was deeper than he'd intended. Amos didn't hear it or else didn't care.

"Because you've got a habit of that," Amos said. "Cap'n's not like that. Killing people without talking it over first makes him jumpy. You did a lot of it on Eros, but… you know."

"Yeah," Miller said.

"Thoth Station wasn't Eros. Next place we go won't be Eros either. Holden doesn't want you around."

"And the rest of you?" Miller asked.

"We don't want you around either," Amos said. His voice wasn't hard or gentle. He was talking about the gauge of a machine part. He was talking about anything. The words hit Miller in the belly, just where he'd expected it. He couldn't have blocked them.

"Here's the thing," Amos went on. "You and me, we're a lot the same. Been around. I know what I am, and my moral compass? I'll tell you, it's fucked. A few things fell different when I was a kid. I could have been those ass-bandits on Thoth. I know that. Captain couldn't have been. It's not in him. He's as close to righteous as anyone out here gets. And when he says you're out, that's just the way it is,

because the way I figure it, he's probably right. Sure as hell has a better chance than I do."

"Okay," Miller said.

"Yeah," Amos said. He finished his beer. Then he finished Naomi's. And then he walked away, leaving Miller to himself and his empty gut. Outside, the *Nauvoo* fanned a glittering array of sensors, testing something or else just preening. Miller waited.

Beside him, Julie Mao leaned on the table, just where Amos had been.

So, she said. *Looks like it's just you and me now.*

"Looks like," he said.

Chapter Forty-Three: Holden

A Tycho worker in blue coveralls and a welding mask sealed up the hole in one of the galley bulkheads. Holden watched with his hand shielding his eyes from the harsh blue glare of the torch. When the plate steel was secured in place, the welder flipped her mask up to check the bead. She had blue eyes and a small mouth in a heart-shaped pixie face and a mop of red hair pulled into a bun. Her name was Sam, and she was the team leader on the *Rocinante* repair project. Amos had been chasing her for two weeks now with no success. Holden was glad, because the pixie had turned out to be one of the best mechanics he'd ever met, and he'd hate for her to focus on anything other than his ship.

"It's perfect," he said to her as she ran one gloved hand over the cooling metal.

"It's okay," she said with a shrug. "We'll grind this down smooth enough, paint it nice, then you'll never even know your ship had a boo-boo." She had a surprisingly deep voice that contrasted with her looks and her habit of using mockingly childlike phrases. Holden guessed that her appearance combined with her chosen profession had led to a lot of people underestimating her in the past. He didn't want to make that mistake.

"You've done amazing work, Sam," he said. He guessed Sam was short for something, but he'd never asked and she'd never volunteered. "I keep telling Fred how happy we are to have you in charge of this job."

"Maybe I'll get a gold star in my next report card," she said while she put her torch away and stood up. Holden tried to think of something to say to that and failed.

"Sorry," she said, turning to face him. "I appreciate your praise to the boss. And to be honest, it's been a lot of fun working on your little girl. She's quite a ship. The beating she took would have blown anything we own into scrap."

"It was a close thing, even for us," Holden replied.

Sam nodded, then began putting the rest of her gear away. As she worked, Naomi climbed down the crew ladder from the upper decks, her gray coveralls hung with electrician's tools.

"How are things up there?" Holden asked.

"Ninety percent," Naomi said as she crossed the galley to the refrigerator and took out a bottle of juice. "Give or take." She took out a second bottle and tossed it to Sam, who caught it one-handed.

"Naomi," Sam said, raising the bottle in mock toast before downing

half of it in one swallow.

"Sammy," Naomi said in return with a grin.

The two of them had hit it off right away, and now Naomi was spending a lot of her off time with Sam and her Tycho crowd. Holden hated to admit it, but he missed being the only social circle Naomi had. When he did admit it to himself, like now, it made him feel like a creep.

"Golgo comp in rec, tonight?" Sam said after she'd gulped down the last of her drink.

"Think those C7 chumps are tired of getting their asses handed to them?" Naomi said in return. To Holden, it sounded like they were speaking in code.

"We can throw the first one," Sam said. "Get 'em hooked tight before we drop the hammer and wipe their roll."

"Sounds good to me," Naomi said, then tossed her empty bottle into the recycling bin and started back up the ladder. "See you at eight, then." She tossed a little wave at Holden. "Later, Captain."

Holden said, "How much longer, do you think?" to Sam's back as she finished with her tools.

Sam shrugged. "Couple days, maybe, to get her to perfect. She could probably fly now, if you're not worried about nonessentials and cosmetics."

"Thanks, again," Holden said, holding out his hand to Sam as she turned around. She shook it once, her palm heavily calloused and her grip firm. "And I hope you mop the floor with those chumps from C7."

She gave him a predatory grin.

"It's not even in doubt."

Through Fred Johnson, the OPA had provided the crew with living quarters on the station during the renovation of the *Roci,* and over the past few weeks, Holden's cabin had almost come to feel like home. Tycho had money, and they seemed to spend a lot of it on their employees. Holden had three rooms to himself, including a bath and a kitchen nook off the public space. On most stations, you'd have to be the governor to have that kind of luxury. Holden had the impression it was fairly standard for management on Tycho.

He tossed his grimy jumpsuit into the laundry bin and started a pot of coffee before jumping into his private shower. A shower every night after work: another almost unthinkable luxury. It would be easy to get

distracted. To start thinking of this period of ship repair and quiet home life as normalcy, not interlude. Holden couldn't let that happen.

Earth's assault on Mars filled the newsfeeds. The domes of Mars still stood, but two showers of meteors had pocked the wide slopes of Olympus Mons. Earth claimed that it was debris from Deimos, Mars that it was an intentional threat and provocation. Martian ships from the gas giants were burning hard for the inner planets. Every day, every hour brought the moment closer when Earth would have to commit to annihilating Mars or backing away. The OPA's rhetoric seemed built to ensure that whoever won would kill them next. Holden had just helped Fred with what Earth would see as the largest act of piracy in the history of the Belt.

And a million and a half people were dying right now on Eros. Holden thought of the video feed he'd seen of what was happening to the people on the station, and shuddered even in the heat of the shower.

Oh, and aliens. Aliens that had tried to take over the Earth two billion years ago, and failed because Saturn got in the way. *Can't forget the aliens.* His brain still hadn't figured out a way to process that, so it kept trying to pretend it didn't exist.

Holden grabbed a towel and turned on the wall screen in his living room while he dried off. The air was filled with the competing scents of coffee, humidity from the shower, and the faintly grassy and floral scent Tycho pumped into all the residences. Holden tried the news, but it was speculation about the war without any new information. He changed to a competition show with incomprehensible rules and psychotically giddy contestants. He flipped through a few feeds that he could tell were comedies, because the actors paused and nodded where they expected the laughs to be.

When his jaw started aching, he realized he was gritting his teeth. He turned off the screen and threw the remote onto his bed in the next room. He wrapped the towel around his waist, then poured a mug of coffee and collapsed onto the couch just in time for his door to chime.

"What?" he yelled at the top of his lungs. No one replied. Good insulation on Tycho. He went to the door, arranging his towel for maximum modesty along the way, and yanked it open.

It was Miller. He was dressed in a rumpled gray suit he'd probably brought from Ceres, and was fumbling around with that stupid hat.

"Holden, hey—" he started, but Holden cut him off.

"What the hell do you want?" Holden said. "And are you *really* standing outside my door with your hat in your hands?"

Miller smiled, then put the hat back on his head. "You know, I always wondered what that meant."

"Now you know," Holden replied.

“You got a minute?” Miller said.

Holden waited a moment, staring up at the lanky detective. He quickly gave up. He probably outweighed Miller by twenty kilos, but it was impossible to be intimidating when the person you were staring down was a foot taller than you.

“Okay, come in,” he said, then headed for his bedroom. “Let me get dressed. There’s coffee.”

Holden didn’t wait for a reply; he just closed the bedroom door and sat on the bed. He and Miller hadn’t exchanged more than a dozen words since returning to Tycho. He knew they couldn’t leave it at that, as much as he might like to. He owed Miller at least the conversation where he told him to get lost.

He put on a pair of warm cotton pants and a pullover, ran one hand through his damp hair, and went back out to the living room. Miller was sitting on his couch holding a steaming mug.

“Good coffee,” the detective said.

“So, let’s hear it,” Holden replied, sitting in a chair across from him.

Miller took a sip of his coffee and said, “Well—”

“I mean, this is the conversation where you tell me how you were right to shoot an unarmed man in the face, and how I’m just too naive to see it. Right?”

“Actually—”

“I fucking told you,” Holden said, surprised to feel the heat rise in his cheeks. “No more of that judge, jury, and executioner shit or you could find your own ride, and you did it anyway.”

“Yes.”

The simple affirmative took Holden off guard.

“Why?”

Miller took another sip of his coffee, then set the mug down. He reached up and took off his hat, tossed it onto the couch next to him, then leaned back.

“He was going to get away with it.”

“Excuse me?” Holden replied. “Did you miss the part where he confessed to everything?”

“That wasn’t a confession. That was a boast. He was untouchable, and he knew it. Too much money. Too much power.”

“That’s bullshit. No one gets to kill a million and a half people and get away with it.”

“People get away with things all time. Guilty as hell, but something gets in the way. Evidence. Politics. I had a partner for a while, name of Muss. When Earth pulled out of Ceres—”

“Stop,” Holden said. “I don’t care. I don’t want to hear any more of your stories about how being a cop makes you wiser and deeper and able to face the truth about humanity. As far as I can tell, all it did

was break you. Okay?"

"Yeah, okay."

"Dresden and his Protogen buddies thought they could choose who lives and who dies. That sound familiar? And don't tell me it's different this time, because everyone says that, every time. And it's not."

"Wasn't revenge," Miller said, a little too hotly.

"Oh really? This wasn't about the girl in the hotel? Julie Mao?"

"Catching him was. Killing him… "

Miller sighed and nodded to himself, then got up and opened the door. He stopped in the doorway and turned around, real pain on his face.

"He was talking us into it," Miller said. "All that about getting the stars and protecting ourselves from whatever shot that thing at Earth? I was starting to think maybe he should get away with it. Maybe things were just too big for right and wrong. I'm not saying he convinced me. But he made me think maybe, you know? Just maybe."

"And for that, you shot him."

"I did."

Holden sighed, then leaned against the wall next to the open door, his arms crossed.

"Amos calls you righteous," Miller said. "You know that?"

"Amos thinks he's a bad guy because he's done some things he's ashamed of," Holden said. "He doesn't always trust himself, but the fact that he cares tells me he *isn't* a bad guy."

"Yeah—" Miller started, but Holden cut him off.

"He looks at his soul, sees the stains, and wants to be clean," he said. "But you? You just shrug."

"Dresden was—"

"This isn't about Dresden. It's about you," Holden said. "I can't trust you around the people I care about."

Holden stared at Miller, waiting for him to reply, but the cop just nodded sadly, then put his hat on and walked away down the gently curving corridor. He didn't turn around.

Holden went back inside and tried to relax, but he felt jumpy and nervous. He would never have gotten off Eros without Miller's help. There was no question about it: Tossing him out on his ear felt wrong. Incomplete.

The truth was Miller made his scalp crawl every time they were in the same room. The cop was like an unpredictable dog that might lick your hand or take a bite out of your leg.

Holden thought about calling Fred and warning him. He called Naomi instead.

"Hey," she answered on the second chime. Holden could hear a

bar's frantic, alcohol-fueled merriment in the background.

"Naomi," he said, then paused, trying to think of some excuse to have called. When he couldn't think of one, he said, "Miller was just here."

"Yeah, he cornered Amos and me a while back. What did he want?"

"I don't know," Holden said with a sigh. "Say goodbye, maybe."

"What are you doing?" Naomi asked. "Want to meet up?"

"Yes. Yes I do."

Holden didn't recognize the bar at first, but after ordering a scotch from a professionally friendly waiter, he realized it was the same place he'd watched Naomi sing karaoke to a Belter punk song what seemed like centuries before. She wandered in and plopped down across from him in the booth just as his drink showed up. The waiter gave her a questioning smile.

"Gah, no," she said quickly, waving her hands at him. "I've had plenty tonight. Just some water, thanks."

As the waiter bustled away, Holden said, "How did your, uh… What exactly is Golgo, anyway? And how did it go?"

"Game they play here," Naomi said, then took a glass of water from their returning waiter and drank half of it in one gulp. "Like a cross between darts and soccer. Never seen it before, but I seem to be good at it. We won."

"Great," Holden said. "Thanks for coming. I know it's late, but this Miller thing freaked me out a bit."

"He wants you to absolve him, I think."

"Because I'm 'righteous,' " Holden said with a sarcastic laugh.

"You are," Naomi said with no irony. "I mean, it's a loaded term, but you're as close to it as anyone I've ever known."

"I've fucked everything up," Holden blurted out before he could stop himself. "Everyone who's tried to help us, or that we've tried to help, has died spectacularly. This whole fucking war. And Captain McDowell and Becca and Ade. And Shed—" He had to stop and swallow a sudden lump in his throat.

Naomi just nodded, then reached across the table and took his hand in hers.

"I need a win, Naomi," he continued. "I need to do something that makes a difference. Fate or Karma or God or whatever dropped me in the middle of this thing, and I need to know I'm making a difference."

Naomi smiled at him and squeezed his hand.

"You're cute when you're being noble," she said. "But you need to stare off into the distance more."

"You're making fun of me."

"Yeah," she said. "I am. Want to come home with me?"

"I—" Holden started, then stopped and stared at her, looking for the joke. Naomi was still smiling at him, nothing in her eyes but warmth and a touch of mischief. While he watched, one curly lock of hair fell over her eye, and she pushed it up without looking away from him. "Wait, what? I thought you'd—"

"I said don't tell me you love me to get me into bed," she said. "But I also said I'd have gone to your cabin anytime you asked over the last four years. I didn't think I was being subtle, and I'm sort of tired of waiting."

Holden leaned back in the booth and tried to remember to breathe. Naomi's grin changed to pure mischief now, and one eyebrow went up.

"You okay, sailor?" she asked.

"I thought you were avoiding me," he said once he was capable of speech. "Is this your way of giving me a win?"

"Don't be insulting," she said, though there was no hint of anger in her voice. "But I've waited weeks for you to get your nerve up, and the ship's almost done. That means you'll probably volunteer us for something really stupid and this time our luck will run out."

"Well—" he said.

"If that happens without us at least giving this a try *once,* I will be very unhappy about it."

"Naomi, I—"

"It's simple, Jim," she said, reaching out for his hand and pulling him back toward her. She leaned across the table between them until their faces were almost touching. "It's a yes or no question."

"Yes."

Chapter Forty-Four: Miller

Miller sat by himself, staring out the wide observation windows without seeing the view. The fungal-culture whiskey on the low black table beside him remained at the same level in the glass as when he'd bought it. It wasn't really a drink. It was permission to sit. There had always been a handful of drifters, even on Ceres. Men and women whose luck had run out. No place to go, no one to ask favors of. No connection to the vast net of humanity. He'd always felt a kind of sympathy for them, his spiritual kindred.

Now he was part of that disconnected tribe in earnest.

Something bright happened on the skin of the great generation ship—a welding array firing off some intricate network of subtle connection, maybe. Past the *Nauvoo,* nestled in the constant hive-like activity of Tycho Station, was a half-degree arc of the *Rocinante,* like a home he'd once had. He knew the story of Moses seeing a promised land he would never enter. Miller wondered how the old prophet would have felt if he'd been ushered in for a moment—a day, a week, a year—and then dropped back out in the desert. Kinder never to leave the wastelands. Safer.

Beside him, Juliette Mao watched him from the corner of his mind carved out for her.

I was supposed to save you, he thought. *I was supposed to find you. Find the truth.*

And didn't you?

He smiled at her, and she smiled back, as world-weary and tired as he was. Because of course he had. He'd found her, he'd found who killed her, and Holden was right. He'd taken revenge. All that he'd promised himself, he'd done. Only it hadn't saved him.

"Can I get you anything?"

For half a second, Miller thought Julie had said it. The serving girl had opened her mouth to ask him again before he shook his head. She couldn't. And even if she had been able to, he couldn't afford it.

You knew it couldn't last, Julie said. *Holden. His crew. You knew you didn't really belong there. You belong with me.*

A sudden shot of adrenaline revved his tired heart. He looked around for her, but Julie was gone. His own privately generated fight-or-flight reaction didn't have room for daydream hallucinations. And still. *You belong with me.*

He wondered how many people he'd known who had taken that path. Cops had a tradition of eating their guns that went back to long before humanity had lifted itself up the gravity well. Here he was,

without a home, without a friend, with more blood on his hands from the past month than from his whole career before it. The in-house shrink on Ceres called it suicidal ideation in his yearly presentation to the security teams. Something to watch out for, like genital lice or high cholesterol. Not a big deal if you were careful.

So he'd be careful. For a while. See where it went.

He stood, hesitated for three heartbeats, then scooped up his bourbon and drank it in a gulp. Liquid courage, they called it, and it seemed to do the trick. He pulled up his terminal, put in a connect request, and tried to compose himself. He wasn't there yet. And if he was going to live, he needed a job.

"Sabez nichts, Pampaw," Diogo said. The kid was wearing a meshwork shirt and pants cut in a fashion as youthful as it was ugly, and in his previous life, Miller would probably have written him off as too young to know anything useful. Now Miller waited. If anything could wring a prospect out of Diogo, it would be the promise of Miller getting a hole of his own. The silence dragged. Miller forced himself not to speak for fear of begging.

"Well… " Diogo said warily. "Well. There's one hombre might could. Just arm and eye."

"Security guard work's fine with me," Miller said. "Anything that pays the bills."

"Il conversa á do. Hear what's said."

"I appreciate anything you can do," Miller replied, then gestured at the bed. "You mind if I…?"

"Mi cama es su cama," Diogo said. Miller lay down.

Diogo stepped into the small shower, and the sound of water against flesh drowned out the air cycler. Even on board ship, Miller hadn't lived in physical circumstances this intimate with anyone since his marriage. Still, he wouldn't have gone as far as to call Diogo a friend.

Opportunity was thinner on Tycho than he'd hoped, and he didn't have much by way of references. The few people who knew him weren't likely to speak on his behalf. But surely there'd be something. All he needed was a way to remake himself, to start over and be someone different from who he'd been.

Assuming, of course, that Earth or Mars—whichever one came out on top of the war—didn't then wipe the OPA and all the stations loyal to it out of the sky. And that the protomolecule didn't escape Eros and

slaughter a planet. Or a station. Or him. He had a moment's chill, recalling that there was still a sample of the thing on board the *Roci.* If something happened with it, Holden and Naomi, Alex and Amos might all join Julie long before Miller did.

He told himself that wasn't his problem anymore. Still, he hoped they'd be all right. He wanted them to be well, even if he wasn't.

"Oi, Pampaw," Diogo said as the door to the public hall slid open. "You hear that Eros started talking?"

Miller lifted himself to one elbow.

"Sí," Diogo said. "Whatever that shit is, it started broadcasting. There's even words and shit. I've got a feed. You want a listen?"

No, Miller thought. *No, I have seen those corridors. What's happened to those people almost happened to me. I don't want anything to do with that abomination.*

"Sure," he said.

Diogo scooped up his own hand terminal and keyed in something. Miller's terminal chimed that it had received the new feed route.

"Chicá perdída in ops been mixing a bunch of it to bhangra," Diogo said, making a shifting dance move with his hips. "Hard-core, eh?"

Diogo and the other OPA irregulars had breached a high-value research station, faced down one of the most powerful and evil corporations in a history of power and evil. And now they were making music from the screams of the dying. Of the dead. They were dancing to it in the low-rent clubs. *What it must be like,* Miller thought, *to be young and soulless.*

But no. That wasn't fair. Diogo was a good kid. He was just naive. The universe would take care of that, given a little time.

"Hard-core," Miller said. Diogo grinned.

The feed sat in queue, waiting. Miller turned out the lights, letting the little bed bear him up against the press of spin. He didn't want to hear. He didn't want to know. He had to.

At first, the sound was nothing—electric squeals and a wildly fluting static. Then, maybe somewhere deep in the back of it, music. A chorus of violas churning away together in a long, distant crescendo. And then, as clear as if someone were speaking into a microphone, a voice.

"Rabbits and hamsters. Ecologically unstabilizing and round and blue as moonbeams. August."

It almost certainly wasn't a real person. The computer systems on Eros could generate any number of perfectly convincing dialects and voices. Men's, women's, children's. And how many millions of hours of data could there be on the computers and storage dumps all through the station?

Another electronic flutter, like finches looped back against themselves. A new voice—feminine and soft this time—with a

throbbing pulse behind it.

"Patient complains of rapid heartbeat and night sweats. Symptom onset reported as three months previous, but with a history… "

The voice faded, and the throbbing rose. Like an old man with Swiss cheese holes in his brain, the complex system that had been Eros was dying, changing, losing its mind. And because Protogen had wired it all for sound, Miller could listen to the station fail.

"I didn't tell him, I didn't tell him, I didn't tell him. The sunrise. I've never seen the sunrise."

Miller closed his eyes and slid down toward sleep, serenaded by Eros. As consciousness faded, he imagined a body in the bed beside him, warm and alive and breathing slowly in time with the rise and fall of the static.

The manager was a thin man, weedy, with hair combed high above his brow like a wave that never crashed. The office hunched close around them, humming at odd moments when the infrastructure—water, air, energy—of Tycho impinged on it. A business built between ducts, improvisational and cheap. The lowest of the low.

"I'm sorry," the manager said. Miller felt his gut tighten and sink. Of all the humiliations the universe had in store for him, this one he hadn't foreseen. It made him angry.

"You think I can't handle it?" he asked, keeping his voice soft.

"It's not that," the weedy man said. "It's… Look, between us, we're looking for a thumb, you know? Someone's idiot kid brother could guard this warehouse. You've got all this experience. What do we need with riot control protocols? Or investigative procedure? I mean, come on. This gig doesn't even come with a gun."

"I don't care," Miller said. "I need something."

The weedy man sighed and gave the exaggerated shrug of a Belter.

"You need something else," he said.

Miller tried not to laugh, afraid it would sound like despair. He stared at the cheap plastic wall behind the manager until the guy started to get uncomfortable. It was a trap. He was too experienced to start over. He knew too much, so there was no going back and doing fresh beginnings.

"All right," he said at last, and the manager across the desk from him let out a breath, then had the good grace to look embarrassed.

"Can I just ask," the weedy man said. "Why did you leave your old

job?"

"Ceres changed hands," Miller said, putting on his hat. "I wasn't on the new team. That was all."

"Ceres?"

The manager looked confused, which in turn confused Miller. He glanced down at his own hand terminal. There was his work history, just the way he'd presented it. The manager couldn't have missed it.

"That's where I was," Miller said.

"For the police thing. But I meant the last job. I mean, I've been around, I understand not putting OPA work on your resume, but you have to figure we all know that you were part of the thing… you know, with the station. And all."

"You think I was working for the OPA," Miller said.

The weedy man blinked.

"You were," he said.

Which, after all, was true.

Nothing had changed in Fred Johnson's office, and everything had. The furnishings, the smell of the air, the sense of its existing somewhere between a boardroom and a command and control center. The generation ship outside the window might have been half a percent closer to completion, but that wasn't it. The stakes of the game had shifted, and what had been a war was something else now. Something bigger. It shone in Fred's eyes and tightened his shoulders.

"We could use a man with your skills," Fred agreed. "It's always the small-scale things that trip you up. How to frisk someone. That kind of thing. Tycho security can handle themselves, but once we're off our station and shooting our way into someone else's, not as much."

"Is that something you're looking to do more of?" Miller said, trying to make it a casual joke. Fred didn't answer. For a moment, Julie stood at the general's side. Miller saw the pair of them reflected in the screens, the man pensive, the ghost amused. Maybe Miller had gotten it wrong from the start, and the divide between the Belt and the inner planets was something besides politics and resource management. He knew as well as anyone that the Belt offered a harder, more dangerous life than Mars or Earth provided. And yet it called these people—the best people—out of humanity's gravity wells to cast themselves into the darkness.

The impulse to explore, to stretch, to leave home. To go as far as

possible out into the universe. And now that Protogen and Eros offered the chance to become gods, to recreate humanity into beings that could go beyond merely human hopes and dreams, it occurred to Miller how hard it would be for men like Fred to turn that temptation away.

"You killed Dresden," Fred said. "That's a problem."

"It needed to happen."

"I'm not sure it did," Fred replied, but his voice was careful. Testing. Miller smiled, a little sadly.

"That's why it needed to happen," he said.

The small, coughing laugh told Miller that Fred understood him. When the general turned back to consider him again, his gaze was steady.

"When it comes to the negotiating table, someone's going to have to answer for it. You killed a defenseless man."

"I did," Miller said.

"When the time comes, I will hand-feed you to the wolves as the first chip I offer. I won't protect you."

"Wouldn't ask you to protect me," Miller said.

"Even if it meant being a Belter ex-cop in an Earth-side prison?"

It was a euphemism, and they both knew it. *You belong with me,* Julie said. And so what did it matter, really, how he got there?

"I've got no regrets," he said, and half a breath later was shocked to discover it was almost true. "If there's a judge out there who wants to ask me about something, I'll answer. I'm looking for a job here, not protection."

Fred sat in his chair, eyes narrow and thoughtful. Miller leaned forward in his seat.

"You've got me in a hard position," Fred said. "You're saying all the right things. But I have a hard time trusting that you'd follow through. Keeping you on the books would be risky. It could undermine my position in the peace negotiations."

"It's a risk," Miller said. "But I've been on Eros and Thoth station. I flew on the *Rocinante* with Holden and his crew. When it comes to analysis of the protomolecule and how we got into this mess, there isn't anyone in a better position to give you information. You can argue I knew too much. That I was too valuable to let go."

"Or too dangerous."

"Sure. Or that."

They were silent for a moment. On the *Nauvoo,* a bank of lights glittered in a gold-and-green test pattern and then went dark.

"Security consultant," Fred said. "Independent. I won't give you a rank."

I'm too dirty for the OPA, Miller thought with a glow of amusement.

“If it comes with my own bunk, I’ll take it,” he said. It was only until the war was over. After that, he was meat for the machine. That was fine. Fred leaned back. His chair hissed softly into its new configuration.

“All right,” Fred said. “Here’s your first job. Give me your analysis. What’s my biggest problem?”

“Containment,” Miller said.

“You think I can’t keep the information about Thoth station and the protomolecule quiet?”

“Of course you can’t,” Miller said. “For one thing, too many people already know. For another thing, one of them’s Holden, and if he hasn’t already broadcast the whole thing on every empty frequency, he will soon. And besides that, you can’t make a peace deal without explaining what the hell’s going on. Sooner or later, it has to come out.”

“And what do you advise?”

For a moment, Miller was back in the darkness, listening to the gibbers of the dying station. The voices of the dead calling to him from across the vacuum.

“Defend Eros,” he said. “All sides are going to want samples of the protomolecule. Locking down access is going to be the only way you get yourself a seat at that table.”

Fred chuckled.

“Nice thought,” he said. “But how do propose we defend something the size of Eros Station if Earth and Mars bring their navies to bear?”

It was a good point. Miller felt a tug of sorrow. Even though Julie Mao—his Julie—was dead and gone, it felt like disloyalty to say it.

“Then you have to get rid of it,” he said.

“And how would I do that?” Fred said. “Even if we studded the thing with nukes, how would we be sure that no little scrap of the thing would make its way to a colony or down a well? Blowing that thing up would be like blowing dandelion fluff into the breeze.”

Miller had never seen a dandelion, but he saw the problem. Even the smallest portion of the goo filling Eros might be enough to start the whole evil experiment over again. And the goo thrived on radiation; simply cooking the station might hurry the thing along its occult path rather than end it. To be sure that the protomolecule on Eros never spread, they’d need to break everything on the station down to its constituent atoms…

“Oh,” Miller said.

“Oh?”

“Yeah. You’re not going to like this.”

“Try me.”

“Okay. You asked. You drive Eros into the sun.”

“Into the sun,” Fred said. “Do you have any idea how much mass we’re talking about here?”

Miller nodded to the wide, clear expanse of window, to the construction yards beyond it. To the *Nauvoo.*

“Big engines on that thing,” Miller said. “Get some fast ships out to the station, make sure no one can get in before you get there. Run the *Nauvoo* into Eros Station. Knock it sunward.”

Fred’s gaze turned inward as he planned, calculated.

“Got to make sure no one gets into it until it hits corona. That’ll be hard, but Earth and Mars are both just as interested in keeping the other guy from having it as in getting it themselves.”

I’m sorry I couldn’t do better, Julie, he thought. *But it’ll be a hell of a funeral.*

Fred’s breath grew slow and deep, his gaze flickering as if he were reading something in the air that only he could see. Miller didn’t interrupt, even when the silence got heavy. It was almost a minute later that Fred let out a short, percussive breath.

“The Mormons are going to be pissed,” he said.

Chapter Forty-Five: Holden

Naomi talked in her sleep. It was one of a dozen things Holden hadn't known about her before tonight. Even though they'd slept in crash couches a few feet apart on many occasions, he'd never heard it. Now, with her face against his bare chest, he could feel her lips move and the soft, punctuated exhalations of her words. He couldn't hear what she was saying.

She also had a scar on her back, just above her left buttock. It was three inches long and had the uneven edges and rippling that came from a tear rather than a slice. Naomi would never get herself knifed in a bar fight, so it had to have come on the job. Maybe she had been climbing through tight spaces in the engine room when the ship maneuvered unexpectedly. A competent plastic surgeon could have made it invisible in one visit. That she hadn't bothered and clearly didn't care was another thing he had learned about her tonight.

She stopped murmuring and smacked her lips a few times, then said, "Thirsty."

Holden slid out from under her and headed for the kitchen, knowing that this was the obsequiousness that always accompanied a new lover. For the next couple of weeks, he wouldn't be able to stop himself from fulfilling every whim Naomi might have. It was a behavior some men carried at the genetic level, their DNA wanting to make sure that first time wasn't just a fluke.

Her room was laid out differently than his, and the unfamiliarity made him clumsy in the dark. He fumbled around for a few minutes in her small kitchen nook, looking for a glass. By the time he found it, filled it, and headed back into the bedroom, Naomi was sitting up in bed. The sheet lay pooled on her lap. The sight of her half nude in the dimly lit room gave him an embarrassingly sudden erection.

Naomi panned her gaze up his body, pausing at his midsection, then at the water glass, and said, "Is that for me?"

Holden didn't know which thing she was asking about, so he just said, "Yes."

"You asleep?"

Naomi's face was on his belly, her breathing slow and deep, but to

his surprise she said, “No.”

“Can we talk?”

Naomi rolled off him and pulled herself up until her face lay next to his on the pillow. Her hair fell across her eyes, and Holden reached out and brushed it away in a move that felt so intimate and proprietary that he had to swallow a lump in his throat.

“Are you about to get serious on me?” she asked, her eyes half lidded.

“Yeah, I am,” he said, and kissed her forehead.

“My last lover was over a year ago,” she said. “I’m a serial monogamist, so as far as I’m concerned, this is an exclusive-rights deal until one of us decides it isn’t. As long as I get advance warning that you’ve decided to end the deal, there won’t be any hard feelings. I’m open to the idea of it being more than just sex, but in my experience that will happen on its own if it’s going to. I have eggs in storage on Europa and Luna, if that matters to you.”

She rolled up onto her elbow, her face hovering over his.

“Did I cover all the bases?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “But I agree to the conditions.”

She flopped onto her back, letting out a long contented sigh.

“Good.”

Holden wanted to hold her, but he felt too hot and sticky with sweat, so he just reached down and held her hand instead. He wanted to tell her that this meant something, that it was already more than sex for him, but all the words he tried out in his head came off sounding phony or maudlin.

“Thank you,” he said instead, but she was already snoring quietly.

They had sex again in the morning. After a long night with too little sleep, it wound up being far more effort than release for Holden, but there was a pleasure in that too, as if less than mind-blowing sex somehow meant something different and funnier and gentler than what they’d already done together. Afterward, Holden went to the kitchen and made coffee, then brought it back to bed on a tray. They drank it without talking, some of the shyness they’d avoided the night before coming now in the artificial morning of the room’s LEDs.

Naomi put her empty coffee cup down and touched the badly healed lump in his recently broken nose.

“Is it hideous?” Holden asked.

“No,” she said. “You were too perfect before. It makes you seem more substantial.”

Holden laughed. “That sounds like a word you use to describe a fat man or a history professor.”

Naomi smiled and touched his chest lightly with her fingertips. It wasn’t an attempt to arouse, just the exploration that came when satiation had removed sex from the equation. Holden tried to remember the last time the cold sanity following sex had been this comfortable, but maybe that had been never. He was making plans to spend the remainder of the day in Naomi’s bed, running through a mental list of restaurants on the station that delivered, when his terminal began buzzing on the nightstand.

“God dammit,” he said.

“You don’t have to answer,” Naomi replied, and moved her explorations to his belly.

“You’ve been paying attention the last couple months, right?” Holden said. “Unless it’s a wrong number, then it’s probably some end-of-the-solar-system-type shit and we have five minutes to evacuate the station.”

Naomi kissed his ribs, which simultaneously tickled him and caused him to question his assumptions about his own refractory period.

“That’s not funny,” she said.

Holden sighed and picked up the terminal off the table. Fred’s name flashed as it buzzed again.

“It’s Fred,” he said.

Naomi stopped kissing him and sat up.

“Yeah, then it’s probably not good news.”

Holden tapped on the screen to accept the call and said, “Fred.”

“Jim. Come see me as soon as you get a chance. It’s important.”

“Okay,” Holden replied. “Be there in half an hour.”

He ended the call and tossed his hand terminal across the room onto the pile of clothes he’d left at the foot of the bed.

“Going to shower, then go see what Fred wants,” he said, pulling off the sheet and getting up.

“Should I come, too?” Naomi asked.

“Are you kidding? I’m never letting you out of my sight again.”

“Don’t get creepy on me,” Naomi replied, but she was smiling when she said it.

The first unpleasant surprise was Miller sitting in Fred's office when they arrived. Holden nodded at the man once, then said to Fred, "We're here. What's up?"

Fred gestured for them to sit, and when they had, he said, "We've been discussing what to do about Eros."

Holden shrugged. "Okay. What about it?"

"Miller thinks that someone will try to land there and recover some samples of the protomolecule."

"I have no trouble believing that someone will be that stupid," Holden said with a nod.

Fred stood up and tapped something on his desk. The screens that normally showed a view of the *Nauvoo* construction outside suddenly switched to a 2-D map of the solar system, tiny lights of different colors marking fleet positions. An angry swarm of green dots surrounded Mars. Holden assumed that meant the greens were Earth ships. There were a lot of red and yellow dots in the Belt and outer planets. Red was probably Mars, then.

"Nice map," Holden said. "Accurate?"

"Reasonably," Fred said. With a few quick taps on his desk, he zoomed in on one portion of the Belt. A potato-shaped lump labeled EROS filled the middle of the screen. Two tiny green dots inched toward it from several meters away.

"That is the Earth science vessel *Charles Lyell* moving toward Eros at full burn. She's accompanied by what we think is a Phantom-class escort ship."

"The *Roci*'s Earth navy cousin," Holden said.

"Well, the Phantom class is an older model, and largely relegated to rear-echelon assignments, but still more than a match for anything the OPA can quickly field," Fred replied.

"Exactly the sort of ship that would be escorting science ships around, though," Holden said. "How'd they get out there so quick? And why just the two of them?"

Fred backed the map up until it was a distant view of the entire solar system again.

"Dumb luck. The *Lyell* was returning to Earth from doing non-Belt asteroid mapping when it diverted course toward Eros. It was close; no one else was. Earth must have seen a chance to grab a sample while everyone else was figuring out what to do."

Holden looked over at Naomi, but her face was unreadable. Miller was staring at him like an entomologist trying to figure out exactly where the pin went.

"So they know, then?" Holden said. "About Protogen and Eros?"

"We assume so," Fred said.

"You want us to chase them away? I mean, I think we can, but that

will only work until Earth can reroute a few more ships to back them up. We won't be able to buy much time."

Fred smiled.

"We won't need much," he said. "We have a plan."

Holden nodded, waiting to hear it, but Fred sat down and leaned back in his chair. Miller stood up and changed the view on the screen to a close-up of the surface of Eros.

Now we get to find out why Fred is keeping this jackal around, Holden thought, but said nothing.

Miller pointed at the picture of Eros.

"Eros is an old station. Lots of redundancy. Lot of holes in her skin, mostly small maintenance airlocks," the former detective said. "The big docks are in five main clusters around the station. We're looking at sending six supply freighters to Eros, along with the *Rocinante.* The *Roci* keeps the science vessel from landing, and the freighters secure themselves to the station, one at each docking cluster."

"You're sending people in?" Holden said.

"Not in," Miller replied. "Just on. Surface work. Anyway, the sixth freighter evacuates the crews once the others are docked. Each abandoned freighter will have a couple dozen high-yield fusion warheads wired to the ship's proximity detectors. Anything tries to land at the docks, and there's a few-hundred-megaton fusion explosion. It should be enough to take out the approaching ship, but even if it doesn't, the docks will be too slagged to land at."

Naomi cleared her throat. "Uh, the UN and Mars both have bomb squads. They'll figure out how to get past your booby traps."

"Given enough time," Fred agreed.

Miller continued as though he hadn't been interrupted.

"The bombs are just a second line of deterrence. *Rocinante* first, bombs second. We're trying to buy Fred's people enough time to prep the *Nauvoo.*"

"The *Nauvoo?*" Holden said, and half a breath later, Naomi whistled low. Miller nodded to her almost as if he were accepting applause.

"The *Nauvoo*'s launching in a long parabolic course, building up speed. It'll hit Eros at a velocity and angle calculated to knock Eros toward the sun. Set off the bombs too. Between the impact energy and the fusion warheads, we figure the surface of Eros'll be hot and radioactive enough to cook anything that tries to land until it's too damn late," Miller finished, then sat back down. He looked up as if he was waiting for reactions.

"This was your idea?" Holden asked Miller.

"*Nauvoo* part was. But we didn't know about the *Lyell* when we first talked about it. The booby trap thing's kind of improvised. I think it'll work, though. Buy us enough time."

“I agree,” Holden said. “We need to keep Eros out of anyone’s hands, and I can’t think of a better way to do it. We’re in. We’ll shoo the science ship away while you do your work.”

Fred leaned forward in his chair with a creak and said, “I knew you’d be on board. Miller was more skeptical.”

“Throwing a million people into the sun seemed like something you might balk at,” the detective said with a humorless grin.

“There’s nothing human left on that station. What’s your part in all of this? You armchair quarterbacking now?”

It came out nastier than he’d intended, but Miller didn’t appear offended.

“I’ll be coordinating security.”

“Security? Why will they need security?”

Miller smiled. All his smiles looked like he was hearing a good joke at a funeral.

“In case something crawls out of an airlock, tries to thumb a ride,” he said.

Holden frowned. “I don’t like to think those things can get around in vacuum. I don’t like that idea at all.”

“Once we bring the surface temp of Eros up to a nice balmy ten thousand degrees, I’m thinking it won’t matter much,” Miller replied. “Until then, best be safe.”

Holden found himself wishing he shared the detective’s confidence.

“What are the odds the impact and detonations just break Eros into a million pieces and scatter them all over the solar system?” Naomi asked.

“Fred’s got some of his best engineers calculating everything to the last decimal to make sure that doesn’t happen,” Miller replied. “Tycho helped build Eros in the first place. They’ve got the blueprints.”

“So,” said Fred. “Let’s deal with the last bit of business.”

Holden waited.

“You still have the protomolecule,” Fred said.

Holden nodded again. “And?”

“And,” replied Fred. “And the last time we sent you out, your ship was almost wrecked. Once Eros has been nuked, it will be the only confirmed sample around, outside of what might still be on Phoebe. I can’t find any reason to let you keep it. I want it to remain here on Tycho when you go.”

Holden stood up, shaking his head.

“I like you, Fred, but I’m not handing that stuff over to anyone who might see it as a bargaining chip.”

“I don’t think you have a lot of—” Fred started, but Holden held up a finger and cut him off. While Fred stared at him in surprise, he grabbed his terminal and opened the crew channel.

“Alex, Amos, either of you on the ship?”

“I’m here,” Amos said a second later. “Finishing up some—”

“Lock it down,” Holden said over him. “Right now. Seal it up. If I don’t call you in an hour, or if anyone other than me tries to board, leave the dock and fly away from Tycho at best possible speed. Direction is your choice. Shoot your way free if you have to. Read me?”

“Loud and clear, Cap,” Amos said. If Holden had asked him to get a cup of coffee, Amos would have sounded exactly the same.

Fred was still staring at him incredulously.

“Don’t force this issue, Fred,” Holden said.

“If you think you can threaten me, you’re mistaken,” Fred said, his voice flat and frightening.

Miller laughed.

“Something funny?” Fred said.

“That wasn’t a threat,” Miller replied.

“No? What would you call it?”

“An accurate report of the world,” Miller said. He stretched slowly as he talked. “If it was Alex on board, he might think the captain was trying to intimidate someone, maybe back down at the last minute. Amos, though? Amos will absolutely shoot his way free, even if it means he goes down with the ship.”

Fred scowled, and Miller shook his head.

“It’s not a bluff,” Miller said. “Don’t call it.”

Fred’s eyes narrowed, and Holden wondered if he’d finally gone too far with the man. He certainly wouldn’t be the first person Fred Johnson had ordered shot. And he had Miller standing right next to him. The unbalanced detective would probably shoot him at the first hint someone thought it was a good idea. It shook Holden’s confidence in Fred that Miller was even here.

Which made it a little more surprising when Miller saved him.

“Look,” the detective said. “Fact is, Holden is the best person to carry that shit around until you decide what to do with it.”

“Talk me into it,” Fred said, his voice still tight with anger.

“Once Eros goes up, he and the *Roci* are going to have their asses hanging in the breeze. Someone might be angry enough to nuke him just on general principles.”

“And how does that make the sample safer with him?” Fred asked, but Holden had understood Miller’s point.

“They might be less inclined to blow me up if I let them know that I’ve got the sample and all the Protogen notes,” he said.

“Won’t make the sample safer,” Miller said. “But it makes the mission more likely to work. And that’s the point, right? Also, he’s an idealist,” Miller continued. “Offer Holden his weight in gold and he’ll

just be offended you tried to bribe him."

Naomi laughed. Miller glanced at her, a small shared smile at the corner of his mouth, then turned back to Fred.

"Are you saying he can be trusted and I can't?" Fred said.

"I was thinking more about the crew," Miller said. "Holden's got a small bunch, and they do what he says. They think he's righteous, so they are too."

"My people follow me," Fred said.

Miller's grin was weary and unassailable.

"There's a lot of people in the OPA," he said.

"The stakes are too high," Fred said.

"You're kind of in the wrong career for safe," Miller said. "I'm not saying it's a great plan. Just you won't get a better one."

Fred's slitted eyes glittered with equal parts frustration and rage. His jaw worked silently for a moment before he spoke.

"Captain Holden? I'm disappointed with your lack of trust after all I've done for you and yours."

"If the human race still exists a month from now, I'll apologize," Holden said.

"Get your crew out to Eros before I change my mind."

Holden rose, nodded to Fred, and left. Naomi walked at his side.

"Wow, that was close," she said under her breath.

Once they'd left the office, Holden said, "I think Fred was half a second from ordering Miller to shoot me."

"Miller's on our side. Haven't you figured that out yet?"

Chapter Forty-Six: Miller

Miller had known when he'd taken Holden's side against his new boss that there were going to be consequences. His position with Fred and the OPA was tenuous to start with, and pointing out that Holden and his crew were not only more dedicated but also more trustworthy than Fred's people wasn't the thing you did when you were kissing up. That it was the truth only made it worse.

He'd expected some kind of payback. He would have been naive not to.

"*Rise up, O men of God, in one united throng,*" the resisters sang. *"Bring in the days of bro-ther-hood, and end the night of wrong… "*

Miller took off his hat and ran fingers through his thinning hair. It wasn't going to be a good day.

The interior of the *Nauvoo* showed more patchwork and process than its hull suggested. Two kilometers long, its designers had built it as more than a huge ship. The great levels stacked one atop the other; alloy girders worked organically with what would have been pastoral meadows. The structure echoed the greatest cathedrals of Earth and Mars, rising up through empty air and giving both thrust-gravity stability and glory to God. It was still metal bones and woven agricultural substrate, but Miller could see where it was all heading.

A generation ship was a statement of overarching ambition and utter faith. The Mormons had known that. They'd embraced it. They'd constructed a ship that was prayer and piety and celebration all at the same time. The *Nauvoo* would be the greatest temple mankind had ever built. It would shepherd its crew through the uncrossable gulfs of interstellar space, humanity's best hope of reaching the stars

Or it would have been, if not for him.

"You want us to gas them, Pampaw?" Diogo asked.

Miller considered the resisters. At a guess, there might have been two hundred of them strung in linked chains across the access paths and engineering ducts. Transport lifts and industrial waldoes stood idle, their displays dark, their batteries shorted.

"Yeah, probably should," Miller sighed.

The security team—his security team—numbered fewer than three dozen. Men and women more unified by the OPA-issued armbands than by their training, experience, loyalties, or politics. If the Mormons had chosen violence, it would have been a bloodbath. If they'd put on environment suits, the protest would have lasted hours. Days, possibly. Instead, Diogo gave the signal, and three minutes later, four small comets arced out into the null-g space, wavering on their

tails of NNLP-alpha and tetrahydrocannabinol.

It was the kindest, gentlest riot control device in the arsenal. Any of the protesters with compromised lungs could still be in trouble, but within half an hour, all of them would be relaxed into near stupor and high as a kite. NNLPa and THC wasn't a combination Miller had ever used on Ceres. If they'd tried to stock it, it would have been stolen for office parties. He tried to take some comfort in the thought. As if it would make up for the lifetimes of dreams and labor he was taking away.

Beside him, Diogo laughed.

It took them three hours to make the primary sweep of the ship, and another five to hunt down all the stowaways huddled in ducts and secure rooms, waiting to make their presence known at the last minute and sabotage the mission. As those were hauled weeping off the ship, Miller wondered whether he'd just saved their lives. If all he'd done with his life was keep Fred Johnson from deciding whether to let a handful of innocent people die with the *Nauvoo,* or risk keeping Eros around for the inner planets, that wasn't so bad.

As soon as Miller gave the word, the OPA tech team moved into action, reengaging the waldoes and transports, fixing the hundred small acts of sabotage that would have kept the *Nauvoo*'s engines from firing, clearing out equipment they wanted to save. Miller watched industrial lifts big enough to house a family of five shift crate after crate, moving out things that had only recently been moved it. The docks were as busy as Ceres at mid-shift. Miller half expected to see his old cohorts wandering among the stevedores and lift tubes, keeping what passed for the peace.

In the quiet moments, he set his hand terminal to the Eros feed. Back when he'd been a kid, there had been a performance artist making the rounds—Jila Sorormaya, her name was. As he recalled, she'd intentionally corrupted data-storage devices and then put the data stream through her music kit. She'd gotten into trouble when some of the proprietary code of the storage device software got incorporated into her music and posted. Miller hadn't been a sophisticate. He'd figured another nutcase artist had to get a real job, and the universe could only be a better place.

Listening to the Eros feed—Radio Free Eros, he called it—he thought maybe he'd been a little rough on old Jila. The squeaks and cross-chatter, the flow of empty noise punctuated by voices, were eerie and compelling. Just like the broken data stream, it was the music of corruption.

… asciugare il pus e che possano sentirsi meglio…

… ja minä nousivat kuolleista ja halventaa kohtalo pakottaa minut ja siskoni…

… do what you have to…

He'd listened to the feed for hours, picking out voices. Once, the whole thing had fluttered, cutting in and out like a piece of equipment on the edge of failure. Only after it had resumed did Miller wonder if the stutters of quiet had been Morse code. He leaned against the bulkhead, the overwhelming mass of the *Nauvoo* towering above him. The ship only half born and already marked for sacrifice. Julie sat beside him, looking up. Her hair floated around her face; her eyes never stopped smiling. Whatever trick of the imagination had kept his own internal Juliette Andromeda Mao from coming back to him as her corpse, he thanked it.

It would have been something, wouldn't it? she said. *Flying through vacuum without a suit. Sleeping for a hundred years and waking up in the light of a different sun.*

"I didn't shoot that fucker fast enough," Miller said aloud.

He could have given us the stars.

A new voice broke in. A human voice shaking with rage.

"Antichrist!"

Miller blinked, returning to reality, and thumbed off the Eros feed. A prisoner transport wound its lazy way through the dock, a dozen Mormon technicians bound to its restraint poles. One was a young man with a pocked face and hatred in his eyes. He was staring at Miller.

"You're the Antichrist, you vile excuse for a human! God knows you! He'll *remember* you!"

Miller tipped his hat as the prisoners ambled by.

"Stars are better off without us," he said, but too softly for anyone but Julie to hear.

A dozen tugs flew before the *Nauvoo,* the web of nanotubule tethers invisible at this distance. All Miller saw was the great behemoth, as much a part of Tycho Station as the bulkheads and air, shift in its bed, shrug, and begin to move. The tugs' drive flares lit the interior space of the station, flickering in their perfectly choreographed duties like Christmas lights, and a nearly subliminal shudder passed through the deep steel bones of Tycho. In eight hours, the *Nauvoo* would be far enough out that the great engines could be brought online without endangering the station with their exhaust plume. It might be more than two weeks after that before it reached Eros.

Miller would beat it there by eighty hours.

"Oi, Pampaw," Diogo said. "Done-done?"

"Yeah," Miller said with a sigh. "I'm ready. Let's get everyone together."

The boy grinned. In the hours since the commandeering of the *Nauvoo,* Diogo had added bright red plastic decorations to three of his front teeth. It was apparently deeply meaningful in the youth culture of Tycho Station, and signified prowess, possibly sexual. Miller felt a moment's relief that he wasn't hot-bunking at the boy's place anymore.

Now that he was running security ops for the OPA, the irregular nature of the group was clearer to him than ever. There had been a time when he'd thought the OPA might be something that could take on Earth or Mars when it came to a real war. Certainly, they had more money and resources than he'd thought. They had Fred Johnson. They had Ceres now, for as long as they could hold it. They'd taken on Thoth Station and won.

And yet the same kids he'd gone on the assault with had been working crowd control at the *Nauvoo,* and more than half of them would be on the demolitions ship when it left for Eros. It was the thing that Havelock would never understand. For that matter, it was the thing Holden would never understand. Maybe no one who had lived with the certainty and support of a natural atmosphere would ever completely accept the power and fragility of a society based in doing what needed doing, in becoming fast and flexible, the way the OPA had. In becoming articulated.

If Fred couldn't build himself a peace treaty, the OPA would never win against the discipline and unity of an inner planet navy. But they would also never lose. War without end.

Well, what was history if not that?

And how would having the stars change anything?

As he walked to his apartment, he opened a channel request on his hand terminal. Fred Johnson appeared, looking tired but alert.

"Miller," he said.

"We're getting ready to ship out if the ordinance is ready."

"It's loading now," Fred replied. "Enough fissionable material to keep the surface of Eros unapproachable for years. Be careful with it. If one of your boys goes down for a smoke in the wrong place, we aren't going to be able to replace the mines. Not in time."

Not *you'll all be dead.* The weapons were precious, not the people.

"Yeah, I'll watch it," Miller said.

"The *Rocinante*'s already on its way."

That wasn't something Miller needed to know, so there was some other reason Fred had mentioned it. His carefully neutral tone made it

something like an accusation. The only controlled sample of protomolecule had left Fred's sphere of influence.

"We'll get out there to meet her in plenty of time to keep anybody off of Eros," Miller said. "Shouldn't be a problem."

On the tiny screen, it was hard to tell how genuine Fred's smile was.

"I hope your friends are really up for this," he said.

Miller felt something odd. A little hollowness just below his breastbone.

"They aren't my friends," he said, keeping his tone of voice light.

"No?"

"I don't exactly have friends. It's more I've got a lot of people I used to work with," he said.

"You put a lot of faith in Holden," Fred said, making it almost a question. A challenge, at least. Miller smiled, knowing that Fred would be just as unsure if his was genuine.

"Not faith. Judgment," he said.

Fred coughed out a laugh.

"And that's why you don't have friends, friend."

"Part of it," Miller said.

There was nothing more to say. Miller dropped the connection. He was almost at his hole, anyway.

It was nothing much. An anonymous cube on the station with even less personality to it than his place back on Ceres. He sat on his bunk, checked his terminal for the status of the demolitions ship. He knew that he should just go up to the docks. Diogo and the others were assembling, and while it wasn't likely that the drug haze of the pre-mission parties would allow them all to arrive on time, it was at least possible. He didn't even have that excuse.

Julie sat in the space behind his eyes. Her legs were folded under her. She was beautiful. She'd been like Fred and Holden and Havelock. Someone born in a gravity well who came to the Belt by choice. She'd died for her choice. She'd come looking for help and killed Eros by doing it. If she'd stayed there, on that ghost ship…

She tilted her head, her hair swinging against the spin gravity. There was a question in her eyes. She was right, of course. It would have slowed things down, maybe. It wouldn't have stopped them. Protogen and Dresden would have found her eventually. Would have found it. Or gone back and dug up a fresh sample. Nothing would have stopped them.

And he knew—knew the way he knew he was himself—that Julie wasn't like the others. That she'd understood the Belt and Belters, and the need to push on. If not for the stars, at least close to them. The luxury available to her was something Miller had never experienced, and never would. But she'd turned away. She'd come out here, and

stayed even when they were going to sell her racing pinnace. Her childhood. Her pride.

That was why he loved her.

When Miller reached the dock, it was clear something had happened. It was in the way the dockworkers held themselves and the looks half amusement and half pleasure, on their faces. Miller signed in and crawled through the awkward Ojino-Gouch-style airlock, seventy years out of date and hardly larger than a torpedo tube, into the cramped crew area of the *Talbot Leeds.* The ship looked like it had been welded together from two smaller ships, without particular concern for design. The acceleration couches were stacked three deep. The air smelled of old sweat and hot metal. Someone had been smoking marijuana recently enough that the filters hadn't cleared it out yet. Diogo was there along with a half dozen others. They all wore different uniforms, but they also all had the OPA armband.

"Oi, Pampaw! Kept top bunk á dir."

"Thanks," Miller said. "I appreciate that."

Thirteen days. He was going to spend thirteen days sharing this tiny space with the demolitions crew. Thirteen days pressed into these couches, with megatons of fission mines in the ship's hold. And yet the others were all smiling. Miller hauled himself up to the acceleration couch Diogo had saved for him, and pointed to the others with his chin.

"Someone have a birthday?"

Diogo gave an elaborate shrug.

"Why's everyone in such a good fucking mood?" Miller said, more sharply than he'd intended. Diogo took no offense. He smiled his great red-and-white teeth.

"Audi-nichts?"

"No, I haven't heard, or I wouldn't be asking," Miller said.

"Mars did the right thing," Diogo said. "Got the feed off Eros, put two and two, and—"

The boy slammed a fist into his open palm. Miller tried to parse what he was saying. They'd attacked Eros? They'd taken on Protogen?

Ah. Protogen. Protogen and Mars. Miller nodded. "The Phoebe science station," he said. "Mars quarantined it."

"Fuck that, Pampaw. *Autoclaved* it, them. Moon is gone. Dropped enough nukes on it to split it subatomic."

They better have, Miller thought. It wasn't a big moon. If Mars had really destroyed it and there was any protomolecule left on a hunk of ejecta…

"Tu sabez?" Diogo said. "They're on our side now. They get it. Mars-OPA alliance."

"You don't really think that," Miller said.

“Nah,” Diogo said, just as pleased with himself in admitting that the hope was fragile at best and probably false. “But don’t hurt to dream, que no?”

“You don’t think?” Miller said, and lay back.

The acceleration gel was too stiff to conform to his body at the dock’s one-third g, but it wasn’t uncomfortable. He checked the news on his hand terminal, and indeed someone in the Martian navy had made a judgment call. It was a lot of ordinance to use, especially in the middle of a shooting war, but they’d expended it. Saturn had one fewer moon, one more tiny, unformed, filamentous ring—if there was even enough matter left from the detonations to form that. It looked to Miller’s unpracticed eye as if the explosions had been designed to drop debris into the protective and crushing gravity of the gas giant.

It was foolish to think it meant the Martian government wouldn’t want samples of the protomolecule. It was naive to pretend that any organization of that size and complexity was univocal about anything, much less something as dangerous and transforming as this.

But still.

Perhaps it was enough just knowing that someone on the other side of the political and military divide had seen the same evidence they had seen and drawn the same conclusions. Maybe it left room for hope. He switched his hand terminal back to the Eros feed. A strong throbbing sound danced below a cascade of noise. Voices rose and fell and rose again. Data streams spewed into one another, and the pattern-recognition servers burned every spare cycle making something from the resultant mess. Julie took his hand, the dream so convincing he could almost pretend he felt it.

You belong with me, she said.

As soon as it’s over, he thought. It was true he kept pushing back the end point of the case. First find Julie, then avenge her, and now destroy the project that had claimed her life. But after that was accomplished, he could let go.

He just had this one last thing he needed to do.

Twenty minutes later, the Klaxon sounded. Thirty minutes later, the engines kicked on, pressing him into the acceleration gel at a joint-crushing high-g burn for thirteen days, with one-g breaks for biological function every four hours. And when they were done, the half-trained jack-of-all-trades crew would be handling nuclear mines capable of annihilating them if they screwed it up.

But at least Julie would be there. Not really, but still.

It didn’t hurt to dream.

Chapter Forty-Seven: Holden

Even the wet cellulose taste of reconstituted artificial scrambled eggs was not enough to ruin Holden's warm, self-satisfied glow. He shoveled the faux eggs into his mouth, trying not to grin. Sitting at his left around the galley table, Amos ate with lip-smacking enthusiasm. To Holden's right, Alex pushed the limp eggs around on his plate with a piece of equally fake toast. Across the table, Naomi sipped a cup of tea and looked at him from under her hair. He stifled the urge to wink at her.

They'd talked about how to break the news to the crew but hadn't come to any consensus. Holden hated to hide anything. Keeping it secret made it seem dirty or shameful. His parents had raised him to believe that sex was something you did in private not because it was embarrassing, but because it was intimate. With five fathers and three mothers, the sleeping arrangements were always complex at his house, but the discussions about who was bedding with whom were never hidden from him. It left him with a strong aversion to hiding his own activities.

Naomi, on the other hand, thought they shouldn't do anything to upset the fragile equilibrium they'd found, and Holden trusted her instincts. She had an insight into group dynamics that he often lacked. So, for now, he was following her lead.

Besides, it would have felt like boasting, and that would have been rude.

Keeping his voice neutral and professional, he said, "Naomi, can you pass the pepper?"

Amos' head snapped up, and he dropped his fork on the table with a loud clatter.

"Holy shit, you guys are doing it!"

"Um," Holden said. "What?"

"Something's been screwy ever since we got back on the *Roci,* but I couldn't figure. But that's *it*! You guys are finally playing hide the weasel."

Holden blinked twice at the big mechanic, unsure of what to say. He glanced at Naomi for support, but her head was down, and her hair completely covered her face. Her shoulders were shaking in silent laughter.

"Jesus, Cap," Amos said, a grin on his wide face. "It fucking took you long enough. If she'd been throwing herself at me like that, I'd have been neck deep in that shit."

"Uh," Alex said, looking shocked enough that it was clear he hadn't

shared Amos' insights. "Wow."

Naomi stopped laughing and wiped tears away from the corners of her eyes.

"Busted," she said.

"Look. Guys, it's important that you know this doesn't affect our—" Holden said, but Amos cut him off with a snort.

"Hey, Alex," Amos said.

"Yo," Alex replied.

"XO boning the captain going to make you a really shitty pilot?"

"Don't believe it will," Alex said with a grin, exaggerating his drawl.

"And, oddly enough, I don't feel the need to be a lousy mechanic."

Holden tried again. "I think it's important that—"

"Cap'n?" Amos continued, ignoring him. "Consider that no one gives a fuck, it won't stop us from doing our jobs, and just enjoy it, since we'll probably all be dead in a few days anyway."

Naomi started laughing again.

"Fine," she said. "I mean, everyone knows I'm only doing it to get a promotion. Oh, wait, right. Already the second-in-command. Hey, can I be captain now?"

"No," Holden said, laughing. "It's a shit job. I'd never ask you to do it."

Naomi grinned and shrugged. *See? I'm not always right.* Holden glanced at Alex, who was looking at him with genuine affection, clearly happy about the idea of him and Naomi together. Everything seemed right.

Eros spun like a potato-shaped top, its thick skin of rock hiding the horrors inside. Alex brought them in close to do a thorough scan of the station. The asteroid swelled on Holden's screen until it looked close enough to touch. At the other ops station, Naomi swept the surface with ladar, looking for anything that might pose a danger to the Tycho freighter crews, still a few days behind. On Holden's tactical display, the UNN science ship continued to flare in a braking maneuver toward Eros, its escort right beside it.

"Still not talking, huh?" Holden asked.

Naomi shook her head, then tapped on her screen and sent the comm's monitoring information to his workstation.

"Nope," she said. "But they see us. They've been bouncing radar off of us for a couple hours now."

Holden tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair and thought about the choices. It was possible that the hull modifications Tycho had made to the *Roci* were fooling the Earth corvette's recognition software. They might just ignore the *Roci,* thinking she was a Belter gas runner that happened to be hanging around. But the *Roci* was running without a transponder, which made her illegal no matter what hull configuration she was showing. That the corvette wasn't trying to warn off a ship that was running dark made him nervous. The Belt and the inner planets were in a shooting war. A Belter ship with no identification was hanging around Eros while two Earth ships flew toward it. No way any captain with half a brain would just ignore them.

The corvette's silence meant something else.

"Naomi, I have a feeling that corvette is going to try and blow us up," Holden said with a sigh.

"It's what I'd do," she replied.

Holden tapped one last complicated rhythm on his chair, then put his headset on.

"All right, I guess I make the first overture, then," he said.

Not wishing to make their conversation public, Holden targeted the Earther corvette with the *Rocinante*'s laser array and signaled a generic linkup request. After a few seconds, the *link established* light went green, and his earplugs began to hiss with faint background static. Holden waited, but the UN ship offered no greeting. They wanted him to speak first.

He flicked off his mic, switching to the shipwide comm.

"Alex, get us moving. One g for now. If I can't bluff this guy, it'll be a shooting match. Be ready to open her up."

"Roger," drawled Alex. "Goin' on the juice, just in case."

Holden glanced over at Naomi's station, but she'd already switched to her tactical screen and had the *Roci* plotting firing solutions and jamming tactics on the two approaching ships. Naomi had been in only one battle, but she was reacting now like a seasoned veteran. He smiled at her back, then turned around before she had time to realize he was staring.

"Amos?" he said.

"Locked down and shipshape down here, Cap. The *Roci*'s pawing at the turf. Let's go kick some ass."

Let's hope we don't have to, Holden thought.

He turned his mic back on.

"This is Captain James Holden of the *Rocinante,* calling the captain of the approaching United Nations Navy corvette, call sign unknown. Please respond."

There was a static-filled pause, followed by "*Rocinante.* Leave our

flight path immediately. If you do not begin moving away from Eros at best possible speed, you will be fired upon."

The voice was young. An aging corvette with the tedious task of following an asteroid-mapping ship around wouldn't be a much sought after command. The captain was probably a lieutenant without patrons or prospects. He'd be inexperienced, but he might see a confrontation as an opportunity to prove himself to his superiors. And that made the next few moments treacherous to navigate.

"Sorry," said Holden. "Still don't know your call sign, or your name. But I can't do what you want. In fact, I can't let anyone land on Eros. I'm going to need you to stop approaching the station."

"*Rocinante,* I don't think you—"

Holden took control of the *Roci*'s targeting system and began painting the approaching corvette with its targeting laser.

"Let me explain what's happening here," he said. "Right now, you're looking at your sensors, and you're seeing what looks like a thrown-together gas freighter that's giving your ship-recognition software fits. And all of a sudden, meaning *right now,* it's painting you with a state-of-the-art target-acquisition system."

"We don't—"

"Don't lie. I know that's what's happening. So here's the deal. Despite how it looks, my ship is newer, faster, tougher, and better armed than yours. The only way for me to really prove that is to open fire, and I'm hoping not to do that."

"Are you threatening me, *Rocinante*?" the young voice on Holden's headset said, its tone hitting just the right notes of arrogance and disbelief.

"You? No," said Holden. "I'm threatening the big, fat, slow-moving, and unarmed ship you're supposed to be protecting. You keep flying toward Eros, and I will unload everything I've got at it. I guarantee we will blow that flying science lab out of the sky. Now, it's possible you might get us while we do it, but by then your mission is screwed anyway, right?"

The line went silent again, only the hiss of background radiation letting him know his headset hadn't died.

When his answer came, it came on the shipwide comms.

Alex said, "They're stoppin', Captain. They just started hard brakin'. Tracking says they'll be relative stopped about two million klicks out. Want me to keep flyin' toward 'em?"

"No, bring us back to our stationary position over Eros," Holden replied.

"Roger that."

"Naomi," Holden said, spinning his chair around to face her. "Are they doing anything else?"

“Not that I can see through the clutter of their exhaust. But they could be tightbeaming messages the other direction and we’d never know,” she said.

Holden flipped the shipwide comm off. He scratched his head for a minute, then unbuckled his restraints.

“Well, we stopped them for now. I’m going to hit the head and then grab a drink. Want anything?”

“He’s not wrong, you know,” Naomi said later that night.

Holden was floating in zero g on the ops deck, his station a few feet away. He’d turned down the deck lights, and the cabin was as dim as a moonlit night. Alex and Amos were sleeping two decks below. They might as well have been a million light-years away. Naomi was floating near her own station, two meters away, her hair unbound and drifting around her like a black cloud. The panel behind her lit her face in profile: the long forehead, flat nose, large lips. He could tell that her eyes were closed. He felt like they were the only two people in the universe.

“Who’s not wrong?” he said, just to be saying something.

“Miller,” she replied as though it were obvious.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Naomi laughed, then swatted with one hand to rotate her body and face him in the air. Her eyes were open now, though with the panel lights behind her, they were visible only as black pools in her face.

“I’ve been thinking about Miller,” she said. “I treated him badly on Tycho. Ignored him because you were angry. I owed him better than that.”

“Why?”

“He saved your life on Eros.”

Holden snorted, but she kept going anyway.

“When you were in the navy,” she finally said, “what were you supposed to do when someone went crazy on the ship? Started doing things that endangered everyone?”

Thinking they were talking about Miller, Holden said, “You restrain him and remove him as a danger to the ship and crew. But Fred didn’t —”

Naomi cut him off.

“What if it’s wartime?” she said. “The middle of a battle?”

“If he can’t be easily restrained, the chief of the watch has an

obligation to protect the ship and crew by whatever means necessary."

"Even shooting him?"

"If that's the only way to do it," Holden replied. "Sure. But it would only be in the most pressing circumstances."

Naomi nodded with her hand, sending her body slowly twisting the other way. She stopped her motion with one unconscious gesture. Holden was pretty good in zero g, but he'd never be that good.

"The Belt is a network," Naomi said. "It's like one big distributed ship. We have nodes that make air, or water, or power, or structural materials. Those nodes may be separated by millions of kilometers of space, but that doesn't make them any less interconnected."

"I see where this is going," Holden said with a sigh. "Dresden was a madman on the ship, Miller shot him to protect the rest of us. He gave me that speech back on Tycho. Didn't buy it then either."

"Why?"

"Because," Holden said. "Dresden wasn't an immediate threat. He was just an evil little man in an expensive suit. He didn't have a gun in his hand, or his finger on a bomb trigger. And I will never trust a man who believes he has the right to unilaterally execute people."

Holden put his foot against the bulkhead and tapped off just hard enough to float a few feet closer to Naomi, close enough to see her eyes, read her reaction to him.

"If that science ship starts flying toward Eros again, I will throw every torpedo we have at it, and tell myself I was protecting the rest of the solar system from what's on Eros. But I won't just start shooting at it now, on the idea that it *might* decide to head to Eros again, because that's murder. What Miller did was murder."

Naomi smiled at him, then grabbed his flight suit and pulled him close enough for a kiss.

"You might be the best person I know. But you're totally uncompromising on what you think is right, and that's what you hate about Miller."

"I do?"

"Yes," she said. "He's totally uncompromising too, but he has different ideas on how things work. You hate that. To Miller, Dresden was an active threat to the ship. Every second he stayed alive endangered everyone else around him. To Miller, it was self-defense."

"But he's wrong. The man was helpless."

"The man talked the UN Navy into giving his company state-of-the-art ships," she said. "He talked his company into murdering a million and a half people. Everything Miller said about why the protomolecule is better off with us was just as true about Dresden. How long is he in an OPA lockup before he finds the jailer who can be bought?"

"He was a prisoner," Holden said, feeing the argument slipping

away from him.

“He was a monster with power, access, and allies who would have paid any price to keep his science project going,” Naomi said. “And I’m telling you as a Belter, Miller wasn’t wrong.”

Holden didn’t answer; he just continued to float next to Naomi, keeping himself in her orbit. Was he angrier about the killing of Dresden or about Miller’s making a decision that disagreed with him?

And Miller had known. When Holden had told him to find his own ride back to Tycho, he’d seen it in the detective’s sad basset hound face. Miller had known it was coming, and had made no attempt to fight or argue. That meant that Miller had made his choice fully cognizant of the cost and ready to pay it. That meant something. Holden wasn’t sure exactly what, but something.

A red telltale began flashing on the wall, and Naomi’s panel woke up and began throwing data onto the screen. She pulled herself down to it using the back of her chair, then tapped out several quick commands.

“Shit,” she said.

“What is it?”

“The corvette or science ship must have called for help,” Naomi said, pointing at her screen. “We’ve got ships on their way from all over the system.”

“How many are coming?” Holden asked, trying to get a better look at her screen.

Naomi made a small sound in the back of her throat, halfway between a chuckle and a cough.

“At a guess? All of them.”

Chapter Forty-Eight: Miller

"You are, and you aren't," the Eros feed said through a semi-random drumming of static. "You are, and you aren't. You are, and you aren't."

The little ship shuddered and bumped. From a crash couch, one of the OPA techs called out a string of obscenities remarkable more for inventiveness than actual rancor. Miller closed his eyes, trying to keep the micro-g adjustments of their nonstandard docking from nauseating him. After days of joint-aching acceleration and an equally bruising braking routine, the small shifts and movements felt arbitrary and strange.

"You are, are, are, are, *are, are, are*… "

He'd spent some time listening to the newsfeeds. Three days after they'd left Tycho, the news of Protogen's involvement with Eros broke. Amazingly, Holden hadn't been the one to do it. Since then, the corporation had gone from total denial, to blaming a rogue subcontractor, to claiming immunity under an Earth defense secrets statute. It didn't sound good for them. Earth's blockade of Mars was still in place, but attention had shifted to the power struggle within Earth, and the Martian navy had slowed its burn, giving the Earth forces a little more breathing room before any permanent decisions had to be made. It looked like they'd postponed Armageddon for a few weeks, anyway. Miller found he could take a certain joy in that. It also left him tired.

More often, he listened to the voice of Eros. Sometimes he watched the video feeds too, but usually, he just listened. Over the hours and days, he began to hear, if not patterns, at least common structures. Some of the voices spooling out of the dying station were consistent—broadcasters and entertainers who were overrepresented in the audio files archives, he guessed. There seemed to be some specific tendencies in, for want of a better term, the music of it too. Hours of random, fluting static and snatched bits of phrases would give way, and Eros would latch on to some word or phrase, fixating on it with greater and greater intensity until it broke apart and the randomness poured back in.

"… are, are, are, ARE, ARE, ARE… "

Aren't, Miller thought, and the ship suddenly shoved itself up, leaving Miller's stomach about half a foot from where it had been. A series of loud clanks followed, and then the brief wail of a Klaxon.

"Dieu! Dieu!" someone shouted. "Bombs son vamen roja! Going to fry it! Fry us toda!"

There was the usual polite chuckle that the same joke had occasioned over the course of the trip, and the boy who'd made it—a pimply Belter no more than fifteen years old—grinned with pleasure at his own wit. If he didn't stop that shit, someone was going to beat him with a crowbar before they got back to Tycho. But Miller figured that someone wasn't him.

A massive jolt forward pushed him hard into the couch, and then gravity was back, the familiar 0.3 g. Maybe a little more. Except that with the airlocks pointing toward ship's down, the pilot had to grapple the spinning skin of Eros' belly first. The spin gravity made what had been the ceiling the new floor; the lowest rank of couches was now the top; and while they rigged the fusion bombs to the docks, they were all going to have to climb up onto a cold, dark rock that was trying to fling them off into the vacuum.

Such were the joys of sabotage.

Miller suited up. After the military-grade suits of the *Rocinante,* the OPA's motley assortment of equipment felt like third-hand clothes. His suit smelled of someone else's body, and the Mylar faceplate had a deformation where it had cracked and been repaired. He didn't like thinking about what had happened to the poor bastard who'd been wearing it. The magnetic boots had a thick layer of corroded plastic and old mud between the plates and a triggering mechanism so old that Miller could feel it click on and off even before he moved his foot. He had the image of the suit locking on to Eros and never letting go.

The thought made him smile. *You belong with me,* his own private Julie had said. It was true, and now that he was here, he felt perfectly certain that he wasn't going to leave. He'd been a cop for too long, and the idea of trying to reconnect to humanity again filled him with the presentiment of exhaustion. He was here to do the last part of his job. And then he was done.

"Oi! Pampaw!"

"I'm coming," Miller said. "Hold your damn horses. It's not like the station's going anyplace."

"A rainbow is a circle you can't see. Can't see. Can't see," Eros said in a child's singsong voice. Miller turned down the volume of his feed.

The rocky surface of the station had no particular purchase for the suits and control waldoes. Two other ships had made polar landings where there was no spin gravity to fight against, but the Coriolis would leave everyone with a subliminal nausea. Miller's team had to keep to the exposed metal plates of the dock, clinging like flies looking down into the starlit abyss.

Engineering the placement of the fusion bombs wasn't trivial work. If the bombs didn't pump enough energy into the station, the surface might cool enough to give someone another chance to put a science

team on it before the penumbra of the sun swallowed it and whatever parts of the *Nauvoo* were still clinging to it. Even with the best minds of Tycho, there was still the chance that the detonations wouldn't sync up. If the pressure waves traveling through the rock amplified in ways they hadn't anticipated, the station could crack open like an egg, spreading the protomolecule through the wide, empty track of the solar system like scattering a handful of dust. But the difference between success and disaster might be literally a question of meters.

Miller crawled up the airlock and out to the station surface. The first wave of technicians were setting up resonance seismographs, the glow of the work lights and readouts the brightest thing in the universe. Miller set his boots on a wide swath of a ceramic steel alloy and let the spin stretch the kinks out of his back. After days in the acceleration couch, the freedom felt euphoric. One of the techs raised her hands, the physical Belter idiom that called for attention. Miller upped the suit volume.

"… insectes rampant sur ma peau… "

With a stab of impatience, he switched from the Eros feed to the team channel.

"Got to move," a woman's voice said. "Too much splashback here. We have to get to the other side of the docks."

"These go on for almost two kilometers," Miller said.

"Is," she agreed. "We can unmoor and move the ship under power or we can tow it. We've got enough lead line."

"Which one's fastest? We don't have a lot of spare time here."

"Towing."

"Tow it, then," Miller said.

Slowly, the ship rose, twenty small, crawling transport drones clinging to leads like they were hauling a great metallic zeppelin. The ship was going to stay with him, here on the station, strapped to the rock like a sacrifice to the gods. Miller walked with the crew as they crossed the wide, closed bay doors. The only sounds were the tapping of his soles as the electromagnets jolted onto the surface and then a tick when they let go again. The only smells were of his own body and the fresh plastic of the air recycler. The metal under his feet shone like someone had cleaned it. Any dust or pebbles had been hurled away long ago.

They worked fast to place the ship, arm the bombs, and fit the security codes, everyone tacitly aware of the great missile that had been the *Nauvoo* speeding toward them.

If another ship came down and tried to disarm the trap, the ship would send synchronizing signals to all the other OPA bomb ships studding the moon's surface. Three seconds later, the surface of Eros would be scrubbed clean. The spare air and supplies were loaded off

the ship, bundled together and ready for reclamation. No reason to waste the resources.

Nothing horrific crawled out of an airlock and tried to attack the crew, which made Miller's presence during the mission entirely superfluous. Or maybe not. Maybe it was just a ride.

When everything was done that could be, Miller sent the all clear, relayed through the now-dead ship's system. The return transport appeared slowly, a dot of light that grew gradually brighter and then spread, the null-g boarding web strung out like scaffolding. At the new ship's word, Miller's team turned off their boots and fired simple maneuvering thrusters either from their suits or, if the suits were too old, from shared ablative evacuation shells. Miller watched them drop away.

"Call va and roll, Pampaw," Diogo said from someplace. Miller wasn't sure which of them he was at this distance. "This tube don't sit."

"I'm not coming," Miller said.

"Sa que?"

"I decided. I'm staying here."

There was a moment of silence. Miller had been waiting for this. He had the security codes. If he needed to crawl back into the shell of their old ship and lock the door behind him, he could. But he didn't want to. He'd prepared his arguments: He would only be going back to Tycho as a political pawn for Fred Johnson's negotiations; he was tired and old in a way that years didn't describe; he'd already died on Eros once, and he wanted to be here to finish it. He'd earned that much. Diogo and the others owed it to him.

He waited for the boy to react, to try to talk him out of it.

"All correct, then," Diogo said. "Buona morte."

"Buona morte," Miller said, and shut off his radio. The universe was silent. The stars below him shifted slowly but perceptibly as the station he hung from spun. One of those lights was the *Rocinante.* Two others were the ships Holden had been sent out to stall. Miller couldn't pick them out. Julie floated beside him, her dark hair floating in the vacuum, the stars shining through her. She looked peaceful.

If you had it to do again, she said. *If you could do it all over from the beginning?*

"I wouldn't," he said.

He watched the OPA transport ship start up its engines, glowing gold and white, and pull away until it was a star again. A small one. And then lost. Miller turned and considered the dark, empty moonscape and the permanent night.

He just needed to be with her for another few hours, and they would both be safe. They would *all* be safe. It was enough. Miller

found himself smiling and weeping, the tears tracking up from his eyes and into his hair.

It's going to be fine, Julie said.

"I know," Miller said.

He stood silently for almost an hour, then turned and made his slow, precarious way back to the sacrificed ship, down the airlock, and into the dim belly. There was enough residual atmosphere that he didn't need to sleep in his suit. He stripped naked, chose an acceleration couch, and curled up on the hard blue gel. Not twenty meters away, five fusion devices powerful enough to outshine the sun waited for a signal. Above him, everything that had once been human in Eros Station changed and re-formed, pouring from one shape to another like Hieronymous Bosch made real. And still almost a day away, the *Nauvoo,* the hammer of God, hurtled toward him.

Miller set his suit to play some old pop tunes he'd enjoyed when he was young and let himself be sung to sleep. When he dreamed, he dreamed he'd found a tunnel at the back of his old hole on Ceres that meant he would at last, at *last,* be free.

His last breakfast was a hard kibble bar and a handful of chocolate scrounged from a forgotten survival pack. He ate it with tepid recycled water that tasted of iron and rot. The signals from Eros were almost drowned by the oscillating frequencies blasting out from the station above him, but Miller made out enough to know where things stood.

Holden had won, much as Miller had expected him to. The OPA was responding to a thousand angry accusations from Earth and Mars and, in the true and permanent style, factions within the OPA itself. It was too late. The *Nauvoo* was due in hours now. The end was coming.

Miller put on his suit for the last time, turned out the lights, and crawled back up the airlock. For a long moment, the exterior release didn't respond, the safety lights glowing red, and he had a stab of fear that he would spend his last moments there, trapped in a tube like a torpedo ready to fire. But he cycled the lock's power, and it opened.

The Eros feed was wordless now, with only a soft murmuring like water over stone. Miller walked out across the wide mouth of the docking bays. The sky above him turned, and the *Nauvoo* rose from the horizon like sun. His splayed hand held at full arm's length wasn't big enough to cover the glow of its engines. He hung by his boots,

watching the ship approach. The phantom Julie watched with him.

If he'd done the math right, the *Nauvoo*'s impact site would be at the center of Eros' major axis. Miller would be able to see it when it happened, and the giddy excitement in his chest reminded him of being young. It would be a show. Oh, it would be something to see. He considered recording it. His suit would be able to make a simple visual file and stream the data out in real time. But no. This was his moment. His and Julie's. The rest of humanity could guess what it had been like if they cared.

The massive glow of the *Nauvoo* filled a quarter of the sky now, and the full circle of it was free of the horizon. The Eros feed's soft murmur shifted to something more clearly synthetic: a rising, spiraling sound that reminded him for no particular reason of the green sweeping radar screens of ancient films. There were voices at the back of it, but he couldn't make out the words or even the language.

The great torch of the *Nauvoo* was a full half of the sky, the stars around it blotted out by the light of full burn. Miller's suit chirped a radiation warning and he shut it off.

A manned *Nauvoo* would never have sustained a burn like that; even in the best couch, the thrust gravity would have pulped bones. He tried to guess how fast the ship would be going when it hit.

Fast enough. That was all that mattered. Fast enough.

There, in the center of the fiery bloom, Miller saw a dark spot, no more than the dot of a pencil's tip. The ship itself. He took a deep breath. When he closed his eyes, the light pressed red through his lids. When he opened them again, the *Nauvoo* had length. Shape. It was a needle, an arrow, a missile. A fist rising from the depths. For the first time in memory, Miller felt awe.

Eros shouted.

"DON'T YOU *FUCKING* TOUCH ME!"

Slowly, the bloom of engine fire changed from a circle to an oval to a great feathery plume, the *Nauvoo* itself showing silver in rough profile. Miller gaped.

The *Nauvoo* had missed. It had turned. It was right now, right *now,* speeding past Eros and not into it. But he hadn't seen any kind of maneuvering rockets fire. And how would you turn something that big, moving that quickly, so abruptly that it would veer off between one breath and the next without also tearing the ship apart? The acceleration g alone…

Miller looked at the stars as if there was some answer written in them. And to his surprise, there was. The sweep of the Milky Way, the infinite scattering of stars were still there. But the angles had changed. The rotation of Eros had shifted. Its relation to the plane of the ecliptic.

For the *Nauvoo* to change course at the last minute without falling apart would have been impossible. And so it hadn't happened. Eros was roughly six hundred cubic kilometers. Before Protogen, it had housed the second-largest active port in the Belt.

And without so much as overcoming the grip of Miller's magnetic boots, Eros Station had dodged.

Chapter Forty-Nine: Holden

Holy shit," said Amos in a flat voice.

"Jim," Naomi said to Holden's back, but he waved her off and opened a channel to Alex in the cockpit.

"Alex, did we just see what my sensors say we saw?"

"Yeah, Cap," the pilot replied. "Radar and scopes are both sayin' Eros jumped two hundred klicks spinward in a little less than a minute."

"Holy shit," Amos repeated in exactly the same emotionless tone. The metallic bang of deck hatches opening and closing echoed through the ship, signaling Amos' approach up the crew ladder.

Holden shook off the flush of irritation he felt at Amos' leaving his post. He'd deal with that later. He needed to be sure that the *Rocinante* and her crew hadn't just experienced a group hallucination.

"Naomi, give me comms," he said.

Naomi turned around in her chair to face him, her face ashen.

"How can you be so calm?" she asked.

"Panic won't help. We need to know what's going on before we can plan intelligently. Please transfer the comms to me."

"Holy shit," Amos said as he climbed into the ops deck. The deck hatch shut with a punctuating bang.

"I don't remember ordering you to leave your post, sailor," Holden said.

"Plan intelligently," Naomi said like they were words in a foreign language that she almost understood. "Plan intelligently."

Amos threw himself at a chair hard enough that the cushioning gel grabbed him and kept him from bouncing off.

"Eros is really fucking big," Amos said.

"Plan intelligently," Naomi repeated, speaking to herself now.

"I mean, *really* fucking big," Amos said. "Do you know how much energy it took to spin that rock up? I mean, it took *years* to do that shit."

Holden put his headset on to drown Amos and Naomi out, and called up Alex again.

"Alex, is Eros still changing velocity?"

"No, Cap. Just sitting there like a rock."

"Okay," Holden said. "Amos and Naomi are vapor locked. How are you doing?"

"Not taking my hands off the stick while that bastard is anywhere in my space, that's for damn sure."

Thank God for military training, Holden thought.

"Good, keep us at a constant distance of five thousand klicks until I say otherwise. Let me know if it moves again, even an inch."

"Roger that, Cap," said Alex.

Holden took off his headset and turned to face the rest of the crew. Amos was looking at the ceiling, ticking points off with his fingers, his eyes unfocused.

"—don't really remember the mass of Eros off the top of my head… " he was saying to no one in particular.

"About seven thousand trillion kilos," Naomi replied. "Give or take. And the heat signature's up about two degrees."

"*Jesus,*" the mechanic said. "I can't do that math in my head. That much mass coming up two degrees like that?"

"A lot," Holden said. "So let's move on—"

"About ten exajoules," Naomi said. "That's just off the top of my head, but I'm not off by an order of magnitude or anything."

Amos whistled.

"Ten exajoules is like, what, a two-gigaton fusion bomb?"

"It's about a hundred kilos converted directly to energy," Naomi said. Her voice began to steady. "Which, of course, we couldn't do. But at least whatever they did wasn't magic."

Holden's mind grabbed on to her words with an almost physical sensation. Naomi was, in fact, about the smartest person he knew. She had just spoken directly to the half-articulated fear he'd been harboring since Eros had jumped sideways: that this was magic, that the protomolecule didn't have to obey the laws of physics. Because if that was true, humans didn't stand a chance.

"Explain," he said.

"Well," she replied, tapping on her keypad. "Heating Eros up didn't move it. So I assume that means it was waste heat from whatever it was they actually did."

"And that means?"

"That entropy still exists. That they can't convert mass to energy with perfect efficiency. That their machines or processes or whatever they use to move seven thousand trillion tons of rock wastes some energy. About a two-gigaton bomb's worth of it."

"Ah."

"You couldn't move Eros two hundred kilometers with a two-gigaton bomb," Amos said with a snort.

"No, you couldn't," Naomi replied. "This is just the leftovers. Heat by-product. Their efficiency is still off the charts, but it isn't perfect. Which means the laws of physics still hold. Which means it isn't magic."

"Might as well be," Amos said.

Naomi looked at Holden.

“So, we—” he started when Alex interrupted over the shipwide comm.

“Cap, Eros is movin’ again.”

“Follow it, get me a course and speed as soon as you can,” Holden said, turning back to his console. “Amos, get back down to engineering. If you leave it again without a direct order, I’ll have the XO beat you to death with a pipe wrench.”

The only reply was the hiss of the deck hatch opening and the bang as it closed behind the descending mechanic.

“Alex,” Holden said, staring at the data stream the *Rocinante* was feeding him about Eros. “Tell me something.”

“Sunward is all we know for sure,” Alex replied, his voice still calm and professional. When Holden had been in the military, he’d been officer track right from the start. He’d never been to military pilot school, but he knew that years of training had compartmentalized Alex’s brain into two halves: piloting problems and, secondarily, everything else. Matching Eros and getting a course for it was the former. Extra-solar space aliens trying to destroy humanity wasn’t a piloting issue and could be safely ignored until he left the cockpit. He might have a nervous breakdown afterward, but until then, Alex would keep doing his job.

“Drop back to fifty thousand klicks and maintain a constant distance,” Holden told him.

“Huh,” said Alex. “Maintainin’ a constant distance might be tough, Cap. Eros just disappeared off the radar.”

Holden felt his throat go tight.

“Say again?”

“Eros just disappeared off the radar,” Alex was saying, but Holden was already punching up the sensor suite to check for himself. His telescopes showed the rock still moving on its new course toward the sun. Thermal imaging showed it as slightly warmer than space. The weird feed of voices and madness that had been leaking out of the station was still detectable, if faint. But radar said there was nothing there.

Magic, a small voice at the back of his mind said again.

No, not magic. Humans had stealth ships too. It was just a matter of absorbing the radar’s energy rather than reflecting it. But suddenly, keeping the asteroid in visual range became all the more important. Eros had shown that it could move fast and maneuver wildly, and it was now invisible to radar. It was entirely possible that a mountain-sized rock could disappear completely.

Gravity began to pile up as the *Roci* chased Eros toward the sun.

“Naomi?”

She looked up at him. The fear was still in her eyes, but she was

holding it together. For now.

"Jim?"

"The comm? Could you…?"

The chagrin on her face was the most reassuring thing he'd seen in hours. She shifted control to his station, and he opened a connection request.

"UNN corvette, this is the *Rocinante,* please respond."

"Go ahead, *Rocinante,*" the other ship said after half a minute of static.

"Calling to confirm our sensor data," Holden said, then transmitted the data regarding Eros' movement. "You guys seeing the same thing?"

Another delay, this one longer.

"Roger that, *Rocinante.*"

"I know we were just about to shoot each other and all, but I think we're a little past that now," Holden said. "Anyway, we're chasing the rock. If we lose sight of it, we might never find it again. Want to come with? Might be nice to have some backup if it decides to shoot at us or something."

Another delay, this one almost two minutes long; then a different voice came on the line. Older, female, and totally lacking the arrogance and anger of the young male voice he'd been dealing with so far.

"*Rocinante,* this is Captain McBride of the UNN Escort Vessel *Ravi.*"

Ah, thought Holden. *I've been talking to the first officer all along. The captain finally took the horn. That might be a good sign.* "I've sent word to fleet command, but it's a twenty-three minute lag right now, and that rock's putting on speed. You have a plan?"

"Not really, *Ravi.* Just follow and gather intel until we find an opportunity to do something that makes a difference. But if you came along, maybe none of your people will shoot at us accidentally while we figure it out."

There was a long pause. Holden knew that the captain of the *Ravi* was weighing the chance that he was telling the truth against the threat he'd made against their science vessel. What if he was in on whatever was happening? He'd be wondering the same thing in their position.

"Look," he said. "I've told you my name. James Holden. I served as a lieutenant in the UNN. My records should be on file. It'll show a dishonorable discharge, but they'll also show that my family lives in Montana. I don't want that rock to hit Earth any more than you do."

The silence on the other end continued for another few minutes.

"Captain," she said, "I believe my superiors would want me to keep an eye on you. We'll be coming along for the ride while the brains

figure this out."

Holden let out a long, noisy exhale.

"Thanks for that, McBride. Keep trying to get your people on the line. I'm going to make a few calls myself. Two corvettes are not going to fix this problem."

"Roger that," the *Ravi* replied, then killed the connection.

"I've opened a connection with Tycho," Naomi said.

Holden leaned back in his chair, the mounting gravity of their acceleration pressing against him. A watery lump was gathering low in his gut, the loose knot telling him that he had no idea what he was doing, that all the best plans had failed, and that the end was near. The brief hope he'd felt was already starting to slip away.

How can you be so calm?

I think I'm watching the end of the human race, Holden thought. *I'm calling Fred so that it isn't my fault when no one has an idea how to stop it. Of course I'm not calm.*

I'm just spreading the guilt.

"How fast?" Fred Johnson asked incredulously.

"Four g's now and climbing," Holden replied, his voice thick as his throat compressed. "Oh, and it's invisible to radar now."

"*Four g.* Do you know how heavy Eros is?"

"There's, uh, been some discussion," Holden said, only the acceleration keeping his impatience from showing in his voice. "The question is, now what? The *Nauvoo* missed. Our plans are shot to shit."

There was another perceptible increase in pressure as Alex sped the ship up to keep up with Eros. A little while longer and speech wouldn't be possible.

"It's definitely headed for Earth?" Fred asked.

"Alex and Naomi are ninety percent or so. Hard to be totally accurate when we can only use visual data. But I trust them. I'd go to where there are thirty billion new hosts too."

Thirty billion new hosts. Eight of whom were his parents. He imagined Father Tom as a bundle of tubes oozing brown goo. Mother Elise as a rib cage dragging itself across the floor with one skeletal arm. And with that much biomass, what could it do then? Move Earth? Turn out the sun?

"Have to warn them," Holden said, trying not to strangle on his own

tongue as he spoke.

"You don't think they know?"

"They see a threat. They may not see the end of all native life in the solar system," Holden said. "You wanted a reason to sit at the table? How about this one: Come together or die."

Fred was quiet for a moment. Background radiation spoke to Holden in mystic whispers full of dire portents while he waited. *Newcomer,* it said. *Hang around for fourteen billion years or so. See what I've seen. Then all this nonsense won't seem so important.*

"I'll see what I can do," Fred said, interrupting the universe's lecture on transience. "In the meantime, what are you going to do?"

Get outrun by a rock and then watch the cradle of humanity die.

"I'm open to suggestions," Holden said.

"Maybe you could detonate some of the surface nukes the demo team put down. Deflect Eros' course. Buy us time."

"They're on proximity fuses. Can't set them off," Holden said, the last word turning into a yelp as his chair stabbed him in a dozen different places and injected him full of fire. Alex had hit them with the juice, which meant Eros was still speeding up, and he was worried they'd all black out. How fast was it going to go? Even on the juice they couldn't sustain prolonged acceleration past seven or eight g without serious risk. If Eros kept this rate of increase up, it would outrun them.

"You can remote detonate," Fred said. "Miller will have the codes. Have the demo team calculate which ones to set off for maximum effect."

"Roger that," Holden said. "I'll give Miller a call."

"I'll work on the inners," Fred said, using the Belter slang without a hint of self-consciousness. "See what I can do."

Holden broke the connection, then linked up to Miller's ship.

"Yo," said whoever was manning the radio there.

"This is Holden, on the *Rocinante.* Give me Miller."

"Uh… " said the voice. "Okay."

There was a click, then static, then Miller saying hello with a faint echo. Still wearing his helmet, then.

"Miller, this is Holden. We need to talk about what just happened."

"Eros moved."

Miller sounded strange, his voice distant, as though he was only barely paying attention to the conversation. Holden felt a flush of irritation but tamped it back down. He needed Miller right now, whether he wanted to or not.

"Look," he said. "I've talked to Fred and he wants us to coordinate with your demo guys. You've got remote codes. If we set off all of them on one side, we can deflect its course. Get your techs on the line,

and we'll work it out."

"Huh, yeah, that sounds like a good idea. I'll send the codes along," said Miller, his voice no longer distant, but holding back a laugh. Like a man about to tell the punch line of a really good joke. "But I can't really help you with the techs."

"Shit, Miller, you pissed those people off, too?"

Miller did laugh now, a free, soft sound that someone who wasn't piling on g could afford. If there was a punch line, Holden had missed it.

"Yeah," Miller said. "Probably. But that's not why I can't get them for you. I'm not on the ship with them."

"What?"

"I'm still on Eros."

Chapter Fifty: Miller

What do you mean you're on Eros?" Holden said.

"Pretty much that," Miller said, covering his growing sense of shame with a casual tone of voice. "Hanging upside down outside the tertiary docks, where we moored one of the ships. Feel like a freaking bat."

"But—"

"Funny thing, too. I didn't feel it when the thing moved. You'd think accelerating like that, it would have thrown me off or squashed me flat, one or the other. But there was nothing."

"Okay, hold on. We're coming to get you."

"Holden," Miller said. "Just stop it, all right?"

The silence didn't last more than a dozen seconds, but it carried a wealth of meaning. *It's not safe to bring the* Rocinante *to Eros,* and *I came here to die,* and *Don't make this harder than it is.*

"Yeah, I just… " Holden said. And then: "Okay. Let me… let me coordinate with the technicians. I'll… Jesus. I'll let you know what they say."

"One thing, though," Miller said. "You're talking about deflecting this sonofabitch? Just keep in mind it's not a rock anymore. It's a ship."

"Right," Holden said. And a moment later: "Okay."

The connection dropped with a tick. Miller checked his oxygen supply. Three hours in-suit, but he could head back to his little ship and refill it well before that. So Eros was moving, was it? He still didn't feel it, but watching the curved surface of the asteroid, he could see micro-asteroids, all coming from the same direction, bouncing off. If the station kept accelerating, they'd start coming more often, more powerfully. He'd need to stay in the ship.

He turned his hand terminal back to the Eros feed. The station beneath him was chirping and muttering, long slow vowel sounds radiating out from it like recorded whale song. After the angry words and static, the voice of Eros sounded peaceful. He wondered what kind of music Diogo's friends would be making out of this. Slow dancing didn't seem like their style. An annoying itch settled in the small of his back, and he shifted in his suit, trying to rub it away. Almost without his noticing it, he grinned. And then laughed. A wave of euphoria passed into him.

There was alien life in the universe, and he was riding on it like a tick on a dog. Eros Station had moved of its own free will and by mechanisms he couldn't begin to imagine. He didn't know how many

years it had been since he'd been overwhelmed by awe. He'd forgotten the feeling. He raised his arms to his sides, reaching out as if he could embrace the endless dark vacuum below him.

Then, with a sigh, he turned back toward the ship.

Back in the protective shell, he took off the vac suit and hooked the air supply to the recyclers to charge up. With only one person to care for, even low-level life support would have it ready to go within the hour. The ship batteries were still almost fully charged. His hand terminal chimed twice, reminding him that it was once again time for the anti-cancer meds. The ones he'd earned the last time he'd been on Eros. The ones he'd be on for the rest of his life. Good joke.

The fusion bombs were in the ship's cargo hold: gray square boxes about half again as long as they were tall, like bricks in a mortar of pink adhesive foam. It took Miller twenty minutes of searching through storage lockers to find a can of solvent that still had charge in it. The thin spray from it smelled like ozone and oil, and the stiff pink foam melted under it. Miller squatted beside the bombs and ate a ration bar that tasted convincingly like apples. Julie sat beside him, her head resting weightlessly on his shoulder.

There had been a few times that Miller had flirted with faith. Most had been when he was young and trying out everything. Then when he was older, wiser, more worn, and in the crushing pain of the divorce. He understood the longing for a greater being, a huge and compassionate intelligence that could see everything from a perspective that dissolved the pettiness and evil and made everything all right. He still felt that longing. He just couldn't convince himself it was true.

And still, maybe there was something like a plan. Maybe the universe had put him in the right place at the right time to do the thing that no one else would do. Maybe all the pain and suffering he'd been through, all the disappointments and soul-crushing years wallowing through the worst that humanity had to offer up, had been meant to bring him here, to this moment, when he was ready to die if it bought humanity a little time.

It would be pretty to think so, Julie said in his mind.

"It would," he agreed with a sigh. At the sound of his voice, the vision of her vanished, just another daydream.

The bombs were heavier than he'd remembered. Under a full g, he wouldn't have been able to move them. At only one-third, it was a struggle, but possible. An agonizing centimeter at a time, he dragged one of them onto a handcart and hauled it to the airlock. Eros, above him, sang to itself.

He had to rest before he tackled the hard work. The airlock was thin enough that only the bomb or he could fit through at a time. He

climbed on top of it to get out the outer airlock door, then had to lift the bomb out with straps he rigged from cargo netting. And once out, it had to be tethered to the ship with magnetic clamps to keep Eros' spin from slinging it out into the void. After he'd pulled it out and strapped it to the cart, he stopped to rest for half an hour.

There were more impacts now, a rough sign that Eros was indeed accelerating. Each one a rifle shot, capable of bouncing clean through him or the ship behind him if bad luck sent it in the right direction. But the odds were low of one of the occasional rocks lining up a killing shot with his tiny antlike figure crawling across the surface. Once Eros cleared the Belt, they'd stop, anyway. Was Eros leaving the Belt? He realized he had no idea where Eros was going. He'd assumed it was Earth. Holden would know by now, probably.

His shoulders ached a little from his efforts, but not badly. He worried that he'd overloaded the cart. Its wheels were stronger than his mag boots, but they could still be overcome. The asteroid above him lurched once, a new and unsettling motion that didn't repeat. His hand terminal cut off the Eros feed, alerting him that he had an incoming connection. He looked at it, shrugged, and let the call come through.

"Naomi," he said before she could speak. "How've you been doing?"

"Hey," she said.

The silence between them stretched.

"You talked to Holden, then?"

"I did," she said. "He's still talking about ways to get you off that thing."

"He's a good guy," Miller said. "Talk him out of it for me, okay?"

The silence hung long enough that Miller started to get uncomfortable.

"What are you doing there?" she asked. As if there were an answer for that. As if all his life could be summarized in answer to one simple question. He danced around what she meant and replied only to what she'd said.

"Well, I've got a nuclear bomb strapped to a cargo wagon. I'm hauling it over to the access hatch and taking it into station."

"Miller—"

"The thing is, we were treating this like a rock. Now everyone knows that's a little simplistic, but it's going to take people time to adjust. Navies are still going to be thinking of this thing like a billiard ball when it's really a rat."

He was talking too fast. The words spilling out of him in a rush. If he didn't give her room, she wouldn't talk. He wouldn't have to hear what she had to say. He wouldn't have to keep her from talking him down.

"It's going to have structure. Engines or control centers. Something. If I truck this thing inside, get it close to whatever coordinates the thing, I can break it. Turn it back into a billiard ball. Even if it's just for a little while, that gives the rest of you a chance."

"I figured," she said. "It makes sense. It's the right thing to do."

Miller chuckled. A particularly solid impact tocked against the ship beneath him, the vibration of it jarring his bones. Gas started venting out of the new hole. The station was moving faster.

"Yeah," he said. "Well."

"I was talking to Amos," she said. "You need a dead man's switch. So that if something happens, the bomb still goes off. If you have the access codes…?"

"I do."

"Good. I've got a routine you can put on your hand terminal. You'll need to keep your finger on the select button. If you go away for five seconds, it sends the go signal. If you want, I can upload it to you."

"So I have to wander around the station with my finger mashed on a button?"

Naomi's tone made it an apology. "They might take you out with a head shot. Or wrestle you down. The longer the gap, the more chance for the protomolecule to disable the bomb before it goes off. If you need more, I can reprogram it."

Miller looked at the bomb resting on its cart just outside the ship's airlock. Its readouts all glowed green and gold. His sigh briefly fogged the inside of his helmet.

"Yeah, no. Five is good. Upload the routine. Am I going to need to tweak it, or is there a simple place I can put the arm-and-fire string?"

"There's a setup section," Naomi said. "It prompts you."

The hand terminal chirped, announcing the new file. Miller accepted it, ran it. It was easy as keying in a door code. Somehow he felt that arming fusion bombs to detonate around him should have been more difficult.

"Got it," he said. "We're good to go. I mean, I still have to move this bastard, but other than that. How fast am I accelerating on this thing, anyway?"

"Eventually it will be faster than the *Roci* can go. Four g and ramping up with no sign of easing off the throttle."

"Can't feel it at all," he said.

"I'm sorry about before," Naomi said.

"It was a bad situation. We did what we had to do. Same as always."

"Same as always," she echoed.

They didn't speak for a few seconds.

"Thanks for the trigger," Miller said. "Tell Amos I appreciate it."

He cut the connection before she could answer. Long goodbyes weren't anyone's strong suit. The bomb rested in the handcart, magnetic clamps in place and a wide woven-steel belt around the whole mess. He moved slowly across the metallic surface of the port docks. If the cart lost its grip on Eros, he wouldn't be strong enough to hold it back. Of course, if one of the increasingly frequent strikes hit him, it would be a lot like getting shot, so waiting around wasn't a good solve either. He put both dangers out of his mind and did the work. For ten nervous minutes, his suit smelled of overheating plastic. All the diagnostics showed within the error bars, and by the time the recyclers cleared it, his air supply still looked good. Another little mystery he wasn't going to solve.

The abyss above him shone with unflickering stars. One of the dots of light was Earth. He didn't know which one.

The service hatch had been tucked in a natural outcropping of stone, the raw-ferrous cart track like a ribbon of silver in the darkness. Grunting, Miller hauled the cart and the bomb and his own exhausted body up around the curve, and spin gravity once again pressed down on his feet instead of stretching his knees and spine. Light-headed, he keyed in the codes until the hatch opened.

Eros lay before him, darker than the empty sky.

He ran the hand terminal connection through the suit, calling Holden for what he expected was the last time.

"Miller," Holden said almost immediately.

"I'm heading in now," he said.

"Wait. Look, there's a way we might be able to get an automated cart. If the *Roci*—"

"Yeah, but you know how it is. I'm already here. And we don't know how fast this sonofabitch can go. We've got a problem we need to fix. This is how we do it."

Holden's hope had been weak, anyway. Pro forma. A gesture and, Miller thought, maybe even heartfelt. Trying to save everyone, right to the last.

"I understand," Holden finally said.

"Okay. So once I've broken whatever the hell I find in there…?"

"We're working on ways to annihilate the station."

"Good. I'd hate to go through the trouble for nothing."

"Is there… Is there anything you want me to do? After?"

"Nah," Miller said, and then Julie was at his side, her hair floating around her like they were underwater. She glowed in more starlight than was actually there. "Wait. Yes. A couple things. Julie's parents. They run Mao-Kwikowski Mercantile. They knew the war was going start before it did. They've got to have links to Protogen. Make sure they don't get away with it. And if you see them, tell them I'm sorry I

didn't find her in time."

"Right," Holden said.

Miller squatted in the darkness. Was there anything else? Shouldn't there be more? A message to Havelock, maybe? Or Muss. Or Diogo and his OPA friends? But then there would have to be something to say.

"Okay," Miller said. "That's it, then. It was good working with you."

"I'm sorry it came down this way," Holden said. It wasn't an apology for what he'd done or said, for what he'd chosen and refused.

"Yeah," Miller said. "But what can you do, right?"

It was as close to goodbye as either of them could get. Miller shut the connection, brought up the script Naomi had sent him, and enabled it. While he was at it, he turned the Eros feed back on.

A soft hushing sound, like fingernails scratching down an endless sheet of paper. He turned on the cart's lights, the dark entrance of Eros brightening to industrial gray, shadows scattering to the corners. His imagined Julie stood in the glare like it was a spotlight, the glow illuminating her and all the structures behind her at the same time, the remnant of a long dream, almost over.

He took off the brakes, pushed, and went inside Eros for the last time.

Chapter Fifty-One: Holden

Holden knew that humans could tolerate extremely high g-forces over short durations. With proper safety systems, professional daredevils had sustained impacts in excess of twenty-five g's and survived. The human body deformed naturally, absorbed energy in soft tissues, and diffused impacts across larger areas.

He also knew that the problem with extended exposure to high g was that the constant pressure on the circulatory system would begin exposing weaknesses. Have a weak spot in an artery that could turn into an aneurysm in forty years? A few hours at seven g might just pop it open now. Capillaries in the eyes started to leak. The eye itself deformed, sometimes causing permanent damage. And then there were the hollow spaces, like the lungs and digestive tract. You piled on enough gravity, and they collapsed.

And while combat ships might maneuver at very high g for short durations, every moment spent under thrust multiplied the danger.

Eros didn't need to shoot anything at them. It could just keep speeding up until their bodies exploded under the pressure. His console was showing five g, but even as he watched, it shifted to six. They couldn't keep this up. Eros was going to get away. There was nothing he could do about it.

But he still didn't order Alex to stop accelerating.

As if Naomi were reading his mind, WE CAN'T KEEP THIS UP POPPED UP on his console, her user ID in front of the text.

FRED'S WORKING ON IT. THEY MIGHT NEED US TO BE WITHIN RANGE OF EROS WHEN THEY COME UP WITH A PLAN, he replied. Even moving his fingers the millimeters necessary to use the controls built into his chair for exactly this reason was painfully difficult.

WITHIN RANGE FOR WHAT? NAOMI TYPED.

Holden didn't answer. He had no idea. His blood was burning with drugs to keep him awake and alert even while his body was being crushed. The drugs had the contradictory effect of making his brain run at double speed while not allowing him to actually think. But Fred would come up with something. Lots of smart people were thinking about it.

And Miller.

Miller was lugging a fusion bomb through Eros right now. When your enemy had the tech advantage, you came at him as low-tech as you could get. Maybe one sad detective pulling a nuclear weapon on a wagon would slip through their defenses. Naomi had said they weren't magic. Maybe Miller could make it and give them the opening they

needed.

Either way, Holden had to be there, even if it was just to see.

FRED, Naomi typed to him.

Holden opened the connection. Fred looked to him like a man suppressing a grin.

"Holden," he said. "How are you guys holding up?"

SIX G'S. SPIT IT OUT.

"Right. So it turns out that the UN cops have been ripping Protogen's network apart, looking for clues as to what the hell's been going on. Guess who showed up as public enemy number one for the Protogen bigwigs? Yours truly. Suddenly all is forgiven, and Earth welcomes me back into her warm embrace. The enemy of my enemy thinks I am a righteous bastard."

GOODY. MY SPLEEN IS COLLAPSING. HURRY UP.

"The idea of Eros crashing into Earth is bad enough. Extinction-level event, even if it's just a rock. But the UN people have been watching the Eros feeds, and it's scaring the shit out of them."

AND.

"Earth is preparing to launch her entire ground-based nuclear arsenal. *Thousands* of nukes. They're going to vaporize that rock. The navy will intercept what's left after the initial attack and sterilize that entire area of space with constant nuclear bombardment. I know it's a risk, but it's what we have."

Holden resisted the urge to shake his head. He didn't want to wind up with one cheek stuck to the chair permanently.

EROS DODGED THE *NAUVOO*. IT'S GOING SIX G'S RIGHT NOW, AND ACCORDING TO NAOMI, MILLER FEELS NO ACCELERATION. WHATEVER IT'S DOING, IT DOESN'T HAVE THE SAME INERTIAL LIMITATIONS WE HAVE. WHAT'S TO STOP IT FROM JUST DODGING AGAIN? AT THESE SPEEDS, THE MISSILES WILL NEVER BE ABLE TO TURN AROUND AND CATCH IT. AND WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU TARGETING ON? EROS DOESN'T REFLECT RADAR ANYMORE.

"That's where you come in. We need you to try bouncing a laser off of it. We can use the *Rocinante*'s targeting system to guide the missiles in."

I HATE TO BREAK IT TO YOU, BUT WE'LL BE OUT OF THIS GAME LONG BEFORE THOSE MISSILES SHOW. WE CAN'T KEEP UP. WE CAN'T GUIDE THE MISSILES IN FOR YOU. AND ONCE WE LOSE VISUAL, NO ONE WILL BE ABLE TO TRACK WHERE EROS IS.

"You might have to put it on autopilot," Fred said.

Meaning *You might all have to die in the seats you're in right now.*

I'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO DIE A MARTYR AND ALL, BUT WHAT MAKES YOU THINK THE ROCI CAN BEAT THIS THING ON ITS OWN? I'M NOT KILLING MY CREW BECAUSE YOU CAN'T COME UP WITH A GOOD PLAN.

Fred leaned toward the screen, his eyes narrowing. For the first time, Fred's mask slipped and Holden saw the fear and helplessness behind it.

"Look, I know what I'm asking, but you know the stakes. This is what we have. I didn't call you to hear how it won't work. Either help

or give up. Right now devil's advocate is just another name for asshole."

I'm crushing myself to death, probably doing permanent damage, just because I wouldn't *give up, you bastard. So sorry I didn't sign my crew up to die the minute you said to do it.*

Having to type everything out had the advantage of restraining emotional outbursts. Instead of ripping into Fred for questioning his commitment, Holden just typed LET ME THINK ABOUT IT and cut the connection.

The optical tracking system watching Eros flashed a warning to him that the asteroid was increasing speed again. The giant sitting on his chest added a few pounds as Alex pushed the *Rocinante* to keep up. A flashing red indicator informed Holden that because of the duration they'd spent at the current acceleration, he could expect as much as 12 percent of the crew to stroke out. It would go up. Enough time, and it would reach 100 percent. He tried to remember the *Roci*'s maximum theoretical acceleration. Alex had already flown it at twelve g briefly when they'd left the *Donnager*. The actual limit was one of those trivial numbers, a way to brag about something your ship would never really do. Fifteen g, was it? Twenty?

Miller hadn't felt any acceleration at all. How fast could you go if you didn't even *feel* it?

Almost without realizing he was going to do it, Holden activated the master engine cutoff switch. Within seconds he was in free fall, wracked with coughs as his organs tried to find their original resting places inside his body. When Holden had recovered enough to take one really deep breath, his first in hours, Alex came on the comm.

"Cap, did you kill the engines?" the pilot said.

"Yeah, that was me. We're done. Eros is getting away no matter what we do. We were just prolonging the inevitable, and risking some crew deaths in the process."

Naomi turned her chair and gave him a sad little smile. She was sporting a black eye from the acceleration.

"We did our best," she said.

Holden shoved out of his chair hard enough that he bruised his forearms on the ceiling, then shoved off hard again and pinned his back to a bulkhead by grabbing on to a fire extinguisher mount. Naomi was watching him from across the deck, her mouth a comical O of surprise. He knew he probably looked ridiculous, like a petulant child throwing a tantrum, but he couldn't stop himself. He broke free of his grip on the fire extinguisher and floated into the middle of the deck. He hadn't known he'd been pounding on the bulkhead with his other fist. Now that he did, his hand hurt.

"God dammit," he said. "Just God dammit."

"We—" Naomi started, but he cut her off.

"We did our best? What the hell does that matter?" Holden felt a red haze in his mind, and not all of it was from the drugs. "I did my best to help the *Canterbury,* too. I tried to do the right thing when I let us be taken by the *Donnager.* Did my good intentions mean jack shit?"

Naomi's expression went flat. Now her eyelids dropped, and she stared at him from narrow slits. Her lips pressed together until they were almost white. *They wanted me to kill you,* Holden thought. *They wanted me to kill my crew just in case Eros can't break fifteen g, and I couldn't do it.* The guilt and rage and sorrow played against each other, turning into something thin and unfamiliar. He couldn't put a name to the feeling.

"You're the last person I'd expect to hear self-pity from," she said, her voice tight. "Where's the captain who's always asking, 'What can we do right now to make things better?' "

Holden gestured around himself helplessly. "Show me which button to push to stop everyone on Earth from being killed, I'll push it."

Just as long as it doesn't kill you.

Naomi unbuckled her harness and floated toward the crew ladder.

"I'm going below to check on Amos," she said, then opened the deck hatch. She paused. "I'm your operations officer, Holden. Monitoring communication lines is part of the job. I know what Fred wanted."

Holden blinked, and Naomi pulled herself out of sight. The hatch slammed behind her with a bang that couldn't have been any harder than normal but felt like it was anyway.

Holden called up to the cockpit and told Alex to take a break and get some coffee. The pilot stopped on his way through the deck, looking like he wanted to talk, but Holden just waved him on. Alex shrugged and left.

The watery feeling in his gut had taken root and bloomed into a full-fledged, limb-shaking panic. Some vicious, vindictive, self-flagellating part of his mind insisted on running nonstop movies of Eros hurtling toward Earth. It would come screaming down out of the sky like every religion's vision of apocalypse made real, fire and earthquakes and pestilential rain sweeping the land. But each time Eros hit the Earth in his mind, it was the explosion of the *Canterbury* he saw. A shockingly sudden white light, and then nothing but the sound of ice pebbles rattling across his hull like gentle hail.

Mars would survive, for a while. Pockets of the Belt would hold out even longer, probably. They had a culture of making do, surviving on scraps, living on the bleeding edge of their resources. But in the end, without Earth, everything would eventually die. Humans had been out of the gravity well a long time. Long enough to have developed the technology to cut that umbilical cord, but they'd just never bothered

to do it. Stagnant. Humanity, for all its desire to fling itself into every livable pocket it could reach, had become stagnant. Satisfied to fly around in ships built half a century before, using technology that hadn't changed in longer than that.

Earth had been so focused on her own problems that she'd ignored her far-flung children, except when asking for her share of their labors. Mars had bent her entire population to the task of remaking the planet, changing its red face to green. Trying to make a new Earth to end their reliance on the old. And the Belt had become the slums of the solar system. Everyone too busy trying to survive to spend any time creating something new.

We found the protomolecule at exactly the right time for it to do the most damage to us, Holden thought.

It had looked like a shortcut. A way to avoid having to do any of the work, to just jump straight to godhood. And it had been so long since anything was a real threat to humanity outside of itself that no one was even smart enough to be scared. Dresden had said it himself: The things that had made the protomolecule, loaded it into Phoebe, and shot it at the Earth were already godlike back when humanity's ancestors thought photosynthesis and the flagellum were cutting-edge. But he'd taken their ancient engine of destruction and turned the key anyway, because when you got right down to it, humans were still just curious monkeys. They still had to poke everything they found with a stick to see what it did.

The red haze in Holden's vision had taken on a strange strobing pattern. It took him a moment to realize that a red telltale on his panel was flashing, letting him know that the *Ravi* was calling. He kicked off a nearby crash couch, floated back to his station, and opened the link.

"*Rocinante* here, *Ravi,* go ahead."

"Holden, why are we stopped?" McBride asked.

"Because we weren't going to keep up anyway, and the danger of crew casualties was getting too high," he replied. It sounded weak even to him. Cowardly. McBride didn't seem to notice.

"Roger. I'm going to get new orders. Will let you know if anything changes."

Holden killed the connection and stared blankly at the console. The visual tracking system was doing its very best to keep Eros in sight. The *Roci* was a good ship. State of the art. And since Alex had tagged the asteroid as a threat, the computer would do everything in its power to keep track of it. But Eros was a fast-moving, low-albedo object that didn't reflect radar. It could move unpredictably and at high speed. It was just a matter of time before they lost track of it, especially if it wanted to be lost track of.

Next to the tracking information on his console, a small data window opened to inform him that the *Ravi* had turned on its transponder. It was standard practice even for military ships to keep them on when there was no apparent threat or need for stealth. The radio man on the little UNN corvette must have flipped it back on out of habit.

And now the *Roci* registered it as a known vessel and threw it onto the threat display with a gently pulsing green dot and a name tag. Holden looked at it blankly for a long moment. He felt his eyes go wide.

"*Shit,*" Holden said, then opened the shipwide comm. "Naomi, I need you in ops."

"I think I'd rather stay down here for a bit," she replied.

Holden hit the battle station's alert button on his console. The deck lights shifted to red and a Klaxon sounded three times.

"XO Nagata to ops," he said. Let her chew him out later. He'd have it coming. But right now he didn't have any time to waste.

Naomi was on the ops deck in less than a minute. Holden had already buckled back into his crash couch and was pulling up the comm logs. Naomi pushed over to her chair and belted in as well. She gave him an inquiring look—*Are we going to die after all?*—but said nothing. If he said so, she would. He felt a spike of equal parts admiration for and impatience with her. He found what he was looking for in the logs before speaking.

"Okay," he said. "We've had radio contact with Miller after Eros dropped off of radar. Is that right?"

"Yes, that's right," she said. "But his suit isn't powerful enough to transmit through the shell of Eros out to much distance, so one of the moored ships is boosting the signal for him."

"Which means that whatever Eros is doing to kill the radar isn't killing all radio transmissions from outside."

"That seems right," Naomi said, a growing curiosity in her voice.

"And you still have the control codes for the five OPA freighters on the surface, right?"

"Yes, sir." And then a moment later: "Oh, *shit.*"

"Okay," Holden said, turning in his chair to face Naomi with a grin. "Why do the *Roci* and every other naval ship in the system have a switch to turn off their transponders?"

"So the enemy can't get a missile lock on the transponder signal and blow them up," she said, sharing his grin now.

Holden spun his chair back around and began opening a comm channel to Tycho Station.

"XO, would you be so kind as to use the control codes Miller gave you to turn those five OPA freighters back on and fire up their

transponders? Unless our visitor on Eros can outrun radio waves, I think we've gotten around the acceleration problem."

"Aye, aye, Captain," Naomi replied. Even looking the other way, Holden could hear the smile in her voice, and it melted the last of the ice in his gut. They had a plan. They were going to make a difference.

"Call coming in from the *Ravi,*" Naomi said. "You want it before I turn the transponders on?"

"Hell yes."

The line clicked.

"Captain Holden. We've got our new orders. Seems we're going to be chasing that thing a little further."

McBride sounded almost like someone who hadn't just been sent to her death. Stoic.

"You might want to hold off on that for a couple minutes," Holden said. "We have an alternative."

As Naomi activated the transponders on the five OPA freighters Miller had left moored to the surface of Eros, Holden laid out the plan to McBride and then, on a separate line, Fred. By the time Fred had gotten back to him with an enthusiastic approval of the plan from both him and the UN Naval command, the five freighters were pinging away, telling the solar system where they were. An hour after that, the largest swarm of interplanetary nuclear weapons in the history of humanity had been fired and were winging their way toward Eros.

We're going to win, Holden thought as he watched the missiles take flight like a swarm of angry red dots on his threat display. *We're going to beat this thing.* And what was more, his crew was going to see the end of it. No one else had to die.

Except…

"Miller's calling," Naomi said. "Probably noticed we turned his ships back on."

Holden had a wrenching feeling in his stomach. Miller would be there, on Eros, when those missiles arrived. Not everyone would get to celebrate the coming victory.

"Hey. Miller. How you doing?" he said, not quite able to keep the funereal tone out of his voice.

Miller's voice was choppy, and half drowned by static, but not so garbled that Holden couldn't hear the tone in it and know that he was about to take a piss all over their parade.

"Holden," Miller said. "We have a problem."

Chapter Fifty-Two: Miller

One. Two. Three.

Miller pushed down on the hand terminal, resetting the trigger again. The double doors in front of him had once been one of thousands of quietly automated mechanisms. They had run reliably in their subtle magnetic tracks, maybe for years. Now something black with the texture of tree bark grew like creepers around their sides, deforming the metal. Past them lay the port corridors, the warehouses, the casino. Everything that had been Eros Station and was now the vanguard of an invading alien intelligence. But to reach it, Miller had to pry open a stuck door. In less than five seconds. While wearing an environment suit.

He put the hand terminal down again and reached quickly for the thin crack where the two doors met. One. Two. The door shifted a centimeter, flakes of black matter sifting down. Three.

Four.

He grabbed the hand terminal again, resetting the trigger.

This shit just wasn't going to work.

Miller sat on the ground beside the cart. The Eros feed whispered and muttered, apparently unaware of the tiny invader scratching at the station's skin. Miller took a long, deep breath. Door didn't move. He had to get past it.

Naomi wasn't going to like this.

With his one free hand, Miller loosened the woven metal strap around the bomb until it could rock back and forth a little. Carefully, slowly, he lifted the corner of it. Then, watching the status readouts, he wedged the hand terminal under it, the metal corner digging hard into the touch screen over the enter button. The trigger stayed green. If the station shook or shifted, he'd still have five seconds to get to it.

Good enough.

Braced with both hands, Miller tugged at the doors. More of the black crust fell away as he levered the doors open far enough to see through. The corridor beyond was nearly round; the dark growth had filled in the corners until the passage looked like a huge desiccated blood vessel. The only lights were his suit's headlights and a million tiny luminescent dots that swirled in the air like blue fireflies. When the Eros feed pulsed, growing momentarily louder, the fireflies dimmed and then returned. The environment suit reported breathable air with higher than expected concentrations of argon, ozone, and benzene.

One of the luminescent dots floated past him, swirling on currents

he couldn't feel. Miller ignored it, pushing at the doors, widening the gap centimeter by centimeter. He could put in an arm to feel the crust. It seemed solid enough to support the cart. That was a godsend. If it had been thigh-high alien mud, he would have had to find some other way to carry the bomb. It was going to be bad enough hauling the cart up to the rounded surface.

No rest for the wicked, Julie Mao said in his mind. *No peace for the good.*

He went back to work.

By the time he'd shoved the doors wide enough to get through, he was sweating. His arms and back ached. The dark crust had started growing down the corridor, tendrils shooting out toward the airlock, keeping to the edges, where walls met floor or ceiling. The blue glow had colonized the air. Eros was heading out the corridor as quickly as he was heading in. Faster, maybe.

Miller hauled the cart up with both hands, watching the hand terminal closely. The bomb rocked, but not so much it lost its grip on the trigger. Once he was safely in the corridor, he took the terminal back.

One. Two.

The heavy bomb casing had carved a little divot in the touch pad, but it still worked. Miller took the cart handle and leaned forward, the uneven, organic surface beneath him translated into the rough tug and flutter of the cart's vibration.

He'd died here once. He'd been poisoned. Shot. These halls, or ones much like them, had been his battleground. His and Holden's. They were unrecognizable now.

He passed through a wide, nearly empty space. The crust had thinned here, the metal walls of the warehouse showing through in places. One LED still glowed in the ceiling, the cool white light spilling onto the darkness.

The path led him to the casino level, the architecture of commerce still bringing visitors to the same spot. The alien bark was nearly gone, but the space had been transformed. Pachinko machines stood in their rows, half melted or exploded or, like a few, still glittering and asking for the financial information that would unlock the gaudy lights and festive, celebratory sound effects. The card tables were still visible under mushroom caps of clear glutinous gel. Lining the walls and cathedral-high ceilings, black ribs rippled with hairlike threads that glowed at the tips without offering any illumination.

Something screamed, the sound muffled by Miller's suit. The broadcast feed of the station sounded louder and richer now that he was under its skin. He had the sudden, transporting memory of being a child and watching a video feed of a boy who'd been swallowed by a

monstrous whale.

Something gray and the size of Miller's two fists together flew by almost too fast to see. It hadn't been a bird. Something scuttled behind an overturned vending machine. He realized what was missing. There had been a million and a half people on Eros, and a large percentage of them had been here, on the casino level, when their own personal apocalypse came. But there were no bodies. Or, no. That wasn't true. The black crust, the millions of dark rills above him with their soft, oceanic glow. Those were the corpses of Eros, recreated. Human flesh, remade. A suit alarm told him he was starting to hyperventilate. Darkness started to creep in at the edge of his vision.

Miller sank to his knees.

Don't pass out, you son of a bitch, he told himself. *Don't pass out, or if you do, at least land so your weight's on the damned trigger.*

Julie put her hand on his. He could almost feel it, and it steadied him. She was right. They were only bodies. Just dead people. Victims. Just another slab of recycled meat, same as every unlicensed whore he'd seen stabbed to death in the cheap hotels on Ceres. Same as all the suicides who'd thrown themselves out of airlocks. Okay, the protomolecule had mutilated the flesh in weird ways. Didn't change what it was. Didn't change what he was.

"When you're a cop," he told Julie, repeating something he'd told every rookie he'd been partnered with in his career, "you don't have the luxury of feeling things. You have to do the job."

So do the job, she said gently.

He nodded. He stood. *Do the job.*

As if in response, the sound in his suit changed, the Eros feed fluting up through a hundred different frequencies before exploding in a harsh flood of what he thought was Hindi. Human voices. *Till human voices wake us,* he thought, without quite being able to recall where the phrase came from.

Somewhere in the station, there was going to be… something. A control mechanism or a power supply or whatever the protomolecule was using instead of an engine. He didn't know what it would look like or how it would be defended. He didn't have any idea how it worked, apart from the assumption that if he blew it up, it wouldn't keep going very well.

So we go back, he told Julie. *We go back to what we do know.*

The thing that was growing inside Eros, using the stone skin of the asteroid as its own unarticulated exoskeleton, hadn't cut off the ports. It hadn't moved the interior walls or recreated the chambers and passages of the casino level. So the station's layout should be pretty near what it had always been. Okay.

Whatever it used to drive the station through space, it was using a

shitload of energy. Okay.

So find the hot spot. With his free hand, he checked the environment suit. Ambient temperature was twenty-seven degrees: hot but far from unbearable. He walked briskly back toward the port corridor. The temperature dropped by less than a hundredth of a degree, but it did drop. All right, then. He could go to each of the corridors, find which one was hottest, and follow it. When he found a place in the station that was, say, three or four degrees hotter than the rest, that would be the place. He'd roll the cart up beside it, let up his thumb, and count to five.

No problem.

When he got back to the cart, something golden with the soft look of heather was growing around the wheels. Miller scraped it off as best he could, but one of the wheels had still developed a squeak. Nothing to be done about that.

With one hand hauling the cart and the other mashing down on his hand terminal's dead-man's-switch, Miller headed up, deeper into the station.

"She's mine," mindless Eros said. It had been stuck on the phrase for the better part of an hour. "She's *mine.* She's… *mine.*"

"Fine," Miller muttered. "You can have her."

His shoulder ached. The squeak in the cart's wheel had grown worse, the whine of it cutting through the souls-of-the-damned madness of the Eros feed. His thumb was starting to tingle from the constant, relentless pressure of not annihilating himself quite yet. With each level he rose, the spin gravity grew lighter and the Coriolis a little more noticeable. It wasn't quite the same as on Ceres, but it was close and felt like coming home. He found himself looking forward to when the job was done. He imagined himself back in his hole, a six-pack of beer, some music on the speakers that had an actual composer instead of the wild, empty-minded glossolalia of the dead station. Maybe some light jazz.

Who ever thought the idea of light jazz would be appealing?

"Catch me if you can, cocksuckers," Eros said. "I am gone and gone and gone. Gone and gone and gone."

The inner levels of the station were both more familiar and stranger. Away from the mass grave of the casino level, more of Eros' old life showed through. Tube stops still glowed, announcing line errors and

counseling patience. Air recyclers hummed. The floors were relatively clean and clear. The sense of near normalcy made the changes stand out eerily. Dark fronds coated the walls with swirling nautilus patterns. Flakes of the stuff drifted down from above, whirling in the spin gravity like soot. Eros still had spin gravity but didn't have gravity from the massive acceleration it was under. Miller chose not to try to figure that out.

A flock of softball-sized spiderlike things crawled through the corridor, leaving a slick sheen of glowing slime behind them. It wasn't until he paused to knock one off the cart that he recognized them as severed hands, the trailing wrist bones charred black and remade. Part of his mind was screaming, but it was a distant one and easy to ignore.

He had to respect the protomolecule. For something that had been expecting prokaryotic anaerobes, it was doing a bang-up job of making do. He paused to check his suit's sensor array. The temperature had risen half a degree since he'd left the casino and a tenth of a degree since he'd entered this particular main hall. The background radiation was also climbing, his poor abused flesh sucking in more rads. The concentration of benzene was going down, and his suit was picking up more exotic aromatic molecules—tetracene, anthracene, naphthalene—with behavior sufficiently strange to confuse the sensors. So it was the right direction. He leaned forward, the cart resisting his pull like a bored kid. As he recalled, the structural layout was roughly like Ceres', and he knew Ceres like he knew his name. One more level up—maybe two—there would be a confluence of services from the lower, high-g levels and the supply and energy systems that did better at lower gravity. It seemed as likely a place to grow a command and control center as any. As good a location for a brain.

"Gone and gone and gone," Eros said. "And gone."

It was funny, he thought, how the ruins of the past shaped everything that came after. It seemed to work on all levels; one of the truths of the universe. Back in the ancient days, when humanity still lived entirely down a well, the paths laid down by Roman legions had become asphalt and later ferroconcrete without ever changing a curve or a turn. On Ceres, Eros, Tycho, the bore of the standard corridor had been determined by mining tools built to accommodate the trucks and lifts of Earth, which had in turn been designed to go down tracks wide enough for a mule cart's axle.

And now the alien—the thing from out in the vast dark—was growing along the corridors, ducts, tube routes, and water pipes laid out by a handful of ambitious primates. He wondered what it would have been like if the protomolecule hadn't been captured by Saturn,

had actually found its way into the soup of primordial Earth. No fusion reactors, no navigation drives, no complex flesh to appropriate. What would it have done differently if it hadn't had to build around some other evolution's design choices?

Miller, Julie said. *Keep moving.*

He blinked. He was standing in the empty passageway at the base of an access ramp. He didn't know how long he'd been lost in his own mind.

Years, maybe.

He blew out a long breath and started up the ramp. The corridors above him were reading as considerably hotter than ambient. Almost three degrees. He was getting close. There was no light, though. He took his tingling, half-numbed thumb off the select button, turned on the hand terminal's little utility LED, and got back to the dead man's switch just before the count of four.

"Gone and gone and… and… and and and *and.*"

The Eros feed squealed, a chorus of voices chattering in Russian and Hindi clamoring over the old singular voice and being drowned out in turn by a deep creaking howl. Whale song, maybe. Miller's suit mentioned politely that he had half an hour of oxygen left. He shut the alarm down.

The transfer station was overgrown. Pale fronds swarmed along the corridors and twisted into ropes. Recognizable insects—flies, cockroaches, water spiders—crawled along the thick white cables in purposeful waves. Tendrils of something that looked like articulated bile swept back and forth, leaving a film of scurrying larvae. They were as much victim of the protomolecule as the human population. Poor bastards.

"You can't take the razor back," Eros said, and its voice sounded almost triumphant. "You can't take the razor back. She is gone and gone and gone."

The temperature was climbing faster now. It took him a few minutes to decide that spinward might be slightly warmer. He hauled the cart. He could feel the squeaking, a tiny, rattling tremor in the bones of his hand. Between the mass of the bomb and the failing wheel bearings, his shoulders were starting to really ache. Good thing he wasn't going to have to haul this damn thing back down.

Julie was waiting for him in the darkness; the thin beam from his hand terminal cut through her. Her hair floated, spin gravity having, after all, no effect on phantoms of the mind. Her expression was grave.

How does it know? she asked.

Miller paused. Every now and then, all through his career, some daydreamed witness would say something, use some phrase, laugh at

the wrong thing, and he'd know that the back of his mind had a new angle on the case.

This was that moment.

"You can't take the razor back," Eros crowed.

The comet that took the protomolecule into the solar system in the first place was a dead drop, not a ship, Julie said, her dark lips never moving. *It was just ballistic. Any ice bullet with the protomolecule in deep freeze. It was aimed at Earth, but it missed and got grabbed by Saturn instead. The payload didn't steer it. Didn't drive it. Didn't navigate.*

"It didn't need to," Miller said.

It's navigating now. It's going to Earth. How does it know to go to Earth? Where did that information come from? It's talking. Where did that grammar come from?

Who is the voice of Eros?

Miller closed his eyes. His suit mentioned that he only had twenty minutes of air.

"You can't take the *Razorback*! She is gone and gone and gone!"

"Oh fuck," Miller said. "Oh *Jesus.*"

He let go of the cart, turning back toward the ramp and the light and the wide station corridors. Everything was shaking, the station itself trembling like someone on the edge of hypothermia. Only of course it wasn't. The only one shaking was him. It was all in the voice of Eros. It had been there all the time. He should have known.

Maybe he had.

The protomolecule didn't know English or Hindi or Russian or any of the languages it had been spouting. All of that had been in the minds and softwares of Eros' dead, coded in the neurons and grammar programs that the protomolecule had eaten. Eaten, but not destroyed. It had kept the information and languages and complex cognitive structures, building itself on them like asphalt over the roads the legions built.

The dead of Eros weren't dead. Juliette Andromeda Mao was alive.

He was grinning so hard his cheeks ached. With one gloved hand, he tried the connection. The signal was too weak. He couldn't get through. He told his uplink on the surface ship to crank up the power, got a connection.

Holden's voice came over the link.

"Hey. Miller. How you doing?"

The words were soft, apologetic. A hospice worker being gentle to the dying. An incandescent spark of annoyance lit his mind, but he kept his voice steady.

"Holden," he said. "We have a problem."

Chapter Fifty-Three: Holden

Actually, we've sort of figured out how to solve the problem," Holden replied.

"I don't think so. I'm linking you to my suit's med data," Miller said.

A few seconds later, four columns of numbers popped up in a small window on Holden's console. It all looked fairly normal, though there were subtleties that only a med-tech, like Shed, would be able to interpret correctly.

"Okay," Holden said. "That's great. You're getting a little irradiated, but other than that—"

Miller cut him off.

"Am I suffering from hypoxia?" he said.

The data from his suit showed 87 mmHg, comfortably above baseline.

"No," Holden said.

"Anything that would make a guy hallucinate or get demented? Alcohol, opiates. Something like that?"

"Not that I can see," Holden said, growing impatient. "What's this about? Are you seeing things?"

"Just the usual," Miller replied. "I wanted to get that shit out the way, because I know what you're going to say next."

He stopped talking, and the radio hissed and popped in Holden's ear. When Miller spoke again after several seconds of silence, his voice had taken on a different tone. It wasn't quite pleading, but close enough to make Holden shift uncomfortably in his seat.

"She's alive."

There was only one *she* in Miller's universe. Julie Mao. "Uh, okay. Not sure how to respond to that."

"You'll have to take my word that I'm not having a nervous breakdown or psychotic episode or anything like that. But Julie's in here. She's driving Eros."

Holden looked at the suit's medical data again, but it kept reporting normal readings, all the numbers except for radiation comfortably in the green. His blood chemistry didn't even look like he was particularly stressed for a guy carrying a fusion bomb to his own funeral.

"Miller, Julie's dead. We both saw the body. We saw what the protomolecule… did to it."

"We saw her body, sure. We just assumed she was dead because of the damage—"

"She didn't have a *heartbeat,*" Holden said. "No brain activity, no

metabolism. That's pretty much the definition of *dead.*"

"How do we know what dead looks like to the protomolecule?"

"We—" Holden started, then stopped. "We don't, I guess. But no heartbeat, that's a pretty good start."

Miller laughed.

"We've both seen the feeds, Holden. Those rib cages equipped with one arm that drag themselves around, think they have a heartbeat? This shit hasn't been playing by our rules since day one, you expect it to start now?"

Holden smiled to himself. Miller was right.

"Okay, so what makes you think Julie isn't just a rib cage and a mass of tentacles?"

"She might be, but it's not her body I'm talking about," Miller said. "*She's* in here. Her mind. It's like she's flying her old racing pinnace. The *Razorback.* She's been babbling about it on the radio for hours now, and I just didn't put it together. But now that I have, it's pretty goddamn clear."

"Why is she headed toward Earth?"

"I don't know," Miller said. He sounded excited, interested. More alive than Holden had ever heard him. "Maybe the protomolecule wants to get there and it's messing with her. Julie wasn't the first person to get infected, but she's the first one that survived long enough to get somewhere. Maybe she's the seed crystal and everything that the protomolecule's doing is built on her. I don't know that, but I can find out. I just need to find her. Talk to her."

"You need to get that bomb to wherever the controls are and set it off."

"I can't do that," Miller said. Because of course he couldn't.

It doesn't matter, Holden thought. *In a little less than thirty hours, you're both radioactive dust.*

"All right. Can you find your girl in less than"—Holden had the *Roci* do a revised time of impact for the incoming missiles—"twenty-seven hours?"

"Why? What happens in twenty-seven hours?"

"Earth fired her entire interplanetary nuclear arsenal at Eros a few hours ago. We just turned the transponders on in the five freighters you parked on the surface. The missiles are targeting them. The *Roci* is guessing twenty-seven hours to impact based on the current acceleration curve. The Martian and UN navies are on their way to sterilize the area after detonation. Make sure nothing survives or slips the net."

"Jesus."

"Yeah," Holden said with a sigh. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. I've had a lot going on, and it sort of slipped my mind."

There was another long silence on the line.

"You can stop them," Miller said. "Shut down the transponders."

Holden spun his chair around to face Naomi. Her face had the same *what did he just say?* look that he knew was on his own. She pulled the suit's medical data over to her console, then called up the *Roci*'s medical expert system and began running a full medical diagnostic. The implication was clear. She thought something was wrong with Miller that wasn't immediately apparent from the data they were getting. If the protomolecule had infected him, used him as a last-ditch misdirection…

"Not a chance, Miller. This is our last shot. If we blow this one, Eros can orbit the Earth, spraying brown goo all over it. No way we take that risk."

"Look," Miller said, his tone alternating between the earlier pleading and a growing frustration. "*Julie is in here.* If I can find her, a way to talk to her, I can stop this without the nukes."

"What, ask the protomolecule to pretty please not infect the Earth, when that was what it was designed to do? Appeal to its better nature?"

Miller paused for a moment before speaking again.

"Look, Holden, I think I know what's going on here. This thing was intended to infect single-celled organisms. The most basic forms of life, right?"

Holden shrugged, then remembered there was no video feed and said, "Okay."

"That didn't work, but it's a smart bastard. Adaptive. It got into a human host, a complex multicelled organism. Aerobic. Huge brain. Nothing like what it was built for. It's been improvising ever since. That mess on the stealth ship? That was its first try. We saw what it was doing with Julie in that Eros bathroom. It was learning how to work with us."

"Where are you going with this?" Holden said. There was no time pressure yet, with the missiles still more than a day away, but he couldn't quite keep the impatience out of his voice.

"All I'm saying is Eros now isn't what the protomolecule's designers planned on. It's their original plan laid over the top of billions of years of our evolution. And when you improvise, you use what you've got. You use what works. Julie's the template. Her brain, her emotions are all over this thing. She sees this run to Earth as a race, and she's crowing about winning. Laughing at you because you can't keep up."

"Wait," Holden said.

"She's not attacking Earth, she's going home. For all we know, she's not heading for Earth at all. Luna, maybe. She grew up there. The protomolecule piggybacked on her structure, her brain. And so she

infected it as much as it infected her. If I can make her understand what's really going on, then maybe I can negotiate with her."

"How do you know that?"

"Call it a hunch," Miller said. "I'm good with hunches."

Holden whistled, the entire situation doing a flip-flop in his head. The new perspective was dizzying.

"But the protomolecule still wants to obey its program," Holden said. "And we have no idea what that is."

"I can damn sure tell you it isn't wiping humans out. The things that shot Phoebe at us two billion years ago didn't know what the hell humans were. Whatever it wants to do needed biomass, and it's got that now."

Holden couldn't stop himself from snorting at that.

"So, what? They don't mean us any harm? Seriously? You think if we explain that we'd rather not have it land on Earth, then it will just agree and go somewhere else?"

"Not it," Miller said. "Her."

Naomi looked up at Holden, shaking her head. She wasn't seeing anything organic wrong with Miller either.

"I've been working this case for, shit, almost a year," Miller said. "I've climbed into her life, read her mail, met her friends. I know her. She's about as independent as a person can be, and she loves us."

"Us?" Holden asked.

"People. She loves humans. She gave up being the little rich girl and joined the OPA. She backed the Belt because it was the right thing to do. No way she kills us if she knows that's what's happening. I just need to find a way to explain. I can do this. Give me a chance."

Holden ran a hand through his hair, grimacing at the accumulating grease. A day or two at high g was not conducive to regular showering.

"Can't do it," Holden said. "Stakes are too high. We're going ahead with the plan. I'm sorry."

"She'll beat you," Miller said.

"What?"

"Okay, maybe she won't. You've got a shitload of firepower. But the protomolecule's figured out how to get around inertia. And Julie? She's a fighter, Holden. If you take her on, my money's on her."

Holden had seen the video of Julie fighting off her attackers on board the stealth ship. She'd been methodical and ruthless in her own defense. She'd fought without giving quarter. He'd seen the wildness in her eyes when she felt trapped and threatened. Only her attackers' combat armor had kept her from doing a lot more damage before they took her down.

Holden felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up at the idea of

Eros actually fighting. So far it had been content to run from their clumsy attacks. What happened when it went to *war*?

"You could find her," Holden said, "and use the bomb."

"If I can't get through to her," Miller said, "that's my deal. I'll find her. I'll talk to her. If I can't get through, I'll take her out, and you can turn Eros into a cinder. I'm fine with that. But you have to give me time to try it my way first."

Holden looked at Naomi looking back at him. Her face was pale. He wanted to see the answer in her expression, to know what he should do based on what she thought. He didn't. It was his call.

"Do you need more than twenty-seven hours?" Holden finally asked.

He heard Miller exhale loudly. There was gratitude in his voice that was, in its own way, worse than the pleading had been.

"I don't know. There are a couple thousand kilometers of tunnels down here, and none of the transit systems work. I have to walk everywhere pulling this damn wagon. Not to mention the fact that I don't really know what I'm even looking for. But give me a little time, I'll figure it."

"And you know that if this doesn't work, you'll have to kill her. Yourself and Julie?"

"I know."

Holden had the *Roci* calculate how long it would take Eros to reach the Earth at the current rate of acceleration. The missiles from Earth were covering the distance a lot faster than Eros was. The IPBMs were just overpowered Epstein drives with nuclear bombs riding up front. Their acceleration limits were the functional limits of the Epstein drive itself. If the missiles didn't arrive, it would still take nearly a week for Eros to get to Earth, even if it kept a constant rate of acceleration.

There was some flexibility in there.

"Hold on, let me work something out here," Holden said to Miller, then muted the connection. "Naomi, the missiles are flying in a straight line toward Eros, and the *Roci* thinks they'll intercept it in about twenty-seven hours, give or take. How much time do we buy if we turn that straight line into a curve? How much of a curve can we do and still give the missiles a chance to catch Eros before it gets too close?"

Naomi tipped her head to one side, looking at him suspiciously through narrowed eyes.

"What are you about to do?" she said.

"Maybe give Miller a chance to head off the first interspecies war."

"You trust *Miller*?" she said with surprising vehemence. "You think he's insane. You threw him off the ship because you thought he was a psychopath and a killer, and now you're going to let him speak for

humanity to an alien God-thing that wants to rip us to shreds?"

Holden had to suppress a smile. Telling an angry woman was how attractive her anger made her would make it stop being cute very quickly. And besides that, he needed it to make sense to her. That was how he'd know if he was right.

"You told me once that Miller was right, even when I thought he was wrong."

"I didn't make it a blanket statement," Naomi said, spacing her words out like she was speaking to an idiot child. "I said he was right to shoot Dresden. That doesn't mean Miller's *stable.* He's in the process of committing suicide, Jim. He's fixated on this dead girl. I can't even begin to imagine what might be going through his head right now."

"Agreed. But he's there, on the scene, and he's got a keen eye for observation and just plain figuring shit out. This guy tracked us to Eros based on the ship name we picked. That's pretty damned impressive. He'd never even met me, and he knew me well enough from researching me to know I'd like naming my ship after Don Quixote's horse."

Naomi laughed. "Really? Is that where that comes from?"

"So when he says that he knows Julie, I believe him."

Naomi started to say something, then paused.

"You think she'll beat the nukes?" Naomi said, more softly.

"He thinks she can. And he thinks he can talk her into not killing us all. I have to give him that chance. I owe it to him."

"Even if it means killing Earth?"

"No," Holden said. "Not that much."

Naomi paused again. Her anger faded.

"So delay the impact, not abort," Naomi said.

"Buy him some time. How much can we get?"

Naomi frowned, looking at the readouts. He could almost see the options clicking through her mind. She smiled, her fierceness gone now, replaced by the mischievous look she got when she knew she was being really clever.

"As much as you want."

"You want to do what?" Fred asked.

"Pull the nukes off course for a while to buy Miller some time, but not so much that we can't still use them to destroy Eros if we need to," Holden said.

“It’s simple,” Naomi added. “I’m sending you detailed instructions.”

“Give me the overview,” Fred said.

“Earth has targeted their missiles on the five freighter transponders on Eros,” Naomi said, pulling her plan up as an overlay on the comm video. “You have ships and stations all over the Belt. You use the transponder reconfiguring program you gave us way back when, and you keep shifting those transponder codes to ships or stations along these vectors to pull the missiles into a long arc that eventually wraps back around to Eros.”

Fred shook his head.

“Won’t work. The minute UNN Command sees we’re doing it, they’ll just tell the missiles to stop following those particular codes, and they’ll try to figure out some other way to target Eros,” he said. “And they’ll also be really pissed at us.”

“Yeah, they’re going to be pissed all right,” Holden said. “But they’re not going to get their missiles back. Just before you start leading the missiles off course, we’re going to launch a massive hacking attempt from multiple locations on the missiles.”

“So they’ll assume an enemy is trying to trick them, and shut down mid-flight reprogramming,” Fred said.

“Yep,” Holden replied. “We’ll tell them we’re going to trick them so they stop listening, and once they’re not listening, we’ll trick them.”

Fred shook his head again, this time giving Holden the vaguely frightened look of a man who wanted to back slowly out of the room.

“There is no way in hell I am going along with this,” he said. “Miller isn’t going to work some magical deal with the aliens. We’re going to wind up nuking Eros no matter what. Why delay the inevitable?”

“Because,” Holden said. “I’m starting to think it might be less dangerous this way. If we use the missiles without taking out Eros’ command center… brain… whatever, we don’t know if it’ll work, but I’m pretty sure our chances go down. Miller’s the only one who can do that. And these are his terms.”

Fred said something obscene.

“If Miller doesn’t manage to talk to it, he’ll take it out. I do trust him for that,” Holden said. “Come on, Fred, you know these missile designs as well as I do. Better. They put enough fuel pellets in those drives to fly around the solar system twice. We aren’t losing anything by giving Miller a little more time.”

Fred shook his head a third time. Holden saw his face go hard. He wasn’t going to buy it. Before he could say no, Holden said, “Remember that box with the protomolecule samples, and all the lab notes? Want to know what my price is for it?”

“You,” Fred said slowly, drawing it out, “are out of your God damn mind.”

“Want to buy it or what?” Holden replied. “You want the magic ticket to a seat at the table? You know my price now. Give Miller his chance, and the sample’s yours.”

“I’d be curious to know how you talked them into it,” Miller said. “I was thinking I was probably screwed.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Holden said. “We bought you your time. Go find the girl and save humanity. We’ll be waiting to hear back.” *And ready to nuke you into dust if we don’t* remained unsaid. There was no need.

“I’ve been thinking about where to go, if I can talk to her,” Miller said. He had the already lost hopefulness of a man with a lottery ticket. “I mean, she’s got to park this thing somewhere.”

If we live. If I can save her. If the miracle is true.

Holden shrugged, even though no one could see it.

“Give her Venus,” he said. “It’s an awful place.”

Chapter Fifty-Four: Miller

I don't and I don't," the voice of Eros muttered. Juliette Mao, talking in her sleep. "I don't and I don't and I don't… "

"Come on," Miller said. "Come *on,* you sonofabitch. *Be* here."

The medical bays were lush and overgrown, black spirals with filaments of bronze and steel climbing the walls, encrusting the examination tables, feeding on the supplies of narcotics, steroids, and antibiotics spilling out of the broken supply cabinets. Miller dug through the clutter with one hand, his suit alarm chiming. His air had the sour taste that came from being through the recyclers too many times. His thumb, still mashed on the dead man's switch, tingled when it wasn't shooting with pain.

He brushed the almost fungal growth off a storage box that wasn't broken yet, found the latch. Four medical gas cylinders: two red, one green, one blue. He looked at the seal. The protomolecule hadn't gotten them yet. Red for anesthetic. Blue nitrogen. He picked up the green. The sterile shield on the delivery nipple was in place. He took a deep sighing breath of dying air. Another few hours. He put down his hand terminal (*one… two…*), popped the seal (*three…*), fed the nipple into his suit's intake (*four…*), and put a finger on the hand terminal. He stood, feeling the cool of the oxygen tank in his hand while his suit revised his life span. Ten minutes, an hour, four hours. The medical cylinder's pressure hit equality with the suit's, and he popped it off. Four more hours. He'd won himself four more hours.

It was the third time he'd managed an emergency resupply since he'd talked to Holden. The first had been at a fire-suppression station, the second at a backup recycling unit. If he went back down to the port, there would probably be some uncompromised oxygen in some of the supply closets and docked ships. If he went all the way back to the surface, the OPA ships would have plenty.

But there wasn't time for that. He wasn't looking for air; he was looking for Juliette. He let himself stretch. The kinks in his neck and back were threatening to turn into cramps. The CO2 levels in the suit were still on the high side of acceptable, even with the new oxygen coming into the mix. The suit needed maintenance and a new filter. It'd have to wait. Behind him, the bomb in its cart kept its own counsel.

He had to find her. Somewhere in the maze of corridors and rooms, the dead city, Juliette Mao was driving them back to Earth. He'd tracked four hot spots. Three had been decent candidates for his original plan of vast nuclear immolation: hubs of wire and black alien

filament tangling into huge organic-looking nodes. The fourth had been a cheap lab reactor churning on its way to meltdown. It had taken him fifteen minutes to get the emergency shutdown going, and he probably shouldn't have wasted the time. But wherever he went, no Julie. Even the Julie of his imagination was gone, as if the ghost had no place now that he knew the real woman was still alive. He missed having her around, even if she'd only been a vision.

A wave went through the medical bays, all the alien growth rising and falling like iron filings with a magnet passed beneath them. Miller's heart sped up, adrenaline leaking into his blood, but it didn't happen again.

He had to find her. He had to find her soon. He could feel exhaustion grinding at him, little teeth chewing at the back of his mind. He already wasn't thinking as clearly as he should. Back on Ceres, he'd have gone back to his hole, slept for a day, and come back to the problem whole. Not an option here.

Full circle. He'd come full circle. Once, in a different life, he'd taken on the task of finding her; then, when he'd failed, there'd been taking vengeance. And now he had the chance to find her again, to save her. And if he couldn't, he was still pulling a cheap, squeaky-wheeled wagon behind him that would do for revenge.

Miller shook his head. He was having too many moments like this, getting lost in his own thoughts. He took a fresh grip on the cart full of fusion bomb, leaned forward, and headed out. The station around him creaked the way he imagined an old sailing ship might have, timbers bent by waves of salt water and the great tidal tug-of-war between earth and moon. Here, it was stone, and Miller couldn't guess what forces were acting on it. Hopefully nothing that would interfere with the signal between his hand terminal and his cargo. He didn't want to be reduced to his component atoms unintentionally.

It was getting more and more clear that he couldn't cover the whole station. He'd known that from the start. If Julie had gotten herself someplace obscure—hidden in some niche or hole like a dying cat—he wouldn't find her. He'd become a gambler, betting against all hope on drawing the inside straight. The voice of Eros shifted, different voices now, singing something in Hindi. A child's round, Eros harmonizing with itself in a growing richness of voices. Now that he knew to listen for it, he heard Julie's voice threading its way among the others. Maybe it had always been there. His frustration verged on physical pain. She was so close, but he couldn't quite reach her.

He pulled himself back into the main corridor complex. The hospital bays had been a good place to look for her too. Plausible. Fruitless. He'd looked at the two mercantile bio-labs. Nothing. He'd tried the morgue, the police holding tanks. He'd even gone through the

evidence room, bin after plastic bin of contraband drugs and confiscated weapons scattered on the floor like oak leaves in one of the grand parks. It had all meant something once. Each one had been part of a small human drama, waiting to be brought out into the light, part of a trial or at least a hearing. Some small practice for judgment day, postponed now forever. All points were moot.

Something silver flew above him, faster than a bird, and then another, and then a flock, streaming by overhead. Light glittered off the living metal, bright as fish scales. Miller watched the alien molecule improvising in the space above him.

You can't stop here, Holden said. *You have to stop running and get on the right road.*

Miller looked over his shoulder. The captain stood, real and not, where his inner Julie would have been.

Well, that's interesting, Miller thought.

"I know," he said. "It's just… I don't know where she went. And… well, look around. Big place, you know?"

You can stop her or I will, his imaginary Holden said.

"If I just knew where she went," Miller said.

She didn't, Holden said. *She never* went.

Miller turned to look at him. The swarm of silver roiled overhead, chittering like insects or a badly tuned drive. The captain looked tired. Miller's imagination had put a surprising swath of blood at the corner of the man's mouth. And then it wasn't Holden anymore; it was Havelock. The other Earther. His old partner. And then it was Muss, her eyes as dead as his own.

Julie didn't go anyplace. Miller had seen her in the hotel room, back when he still hadn't believed that anything but a bad smell could rise from the grave. Back before. She'd been taken away in a body bag. And then taken somewhere else. The Protogen scientists had recovered her, harvested the protomolecule, and spread Julie's remade flesh through the station like bees pollinating a field of wildflowers. They'd given her the station, but before they'd done it, they'd put her someplace they thought they would be safe.

Safe room. Until they were ready to distribute the thing, they'd want to contain it. To pretend it could be contained. It wasn't likely they'd have gone to the trouble of cleaning up after they'd gotten what they needed. It wasn't as if anyone else was going to be around to use the space, so chances were good she was still there. That narrowed things.

There would be isolation wards in the hospital, but Protogen wouldn't have been likely to use facilities where non-Protogen doctors and nurses might wonder what was happening. Unnecessary risk.

All right.

They could have set up in one of the manufacturing plants down by the port. There were plenty of places there that required all-waldo work. But again, it would have been at the risk of being discovered or questioned before the trap was ready to spring.

It's a drug house, Muss said in his mind. *You want privacy, you want control. Extracting the bug from the dead girl and extracting the good shit from the poppy seeds might have different chemistry, but it's still crime.*

"Good point," Miller said. "And near the casino level… No, that's not right. The casino was the second stage. The first was the radiation scare. They put a bunch of people in the radiation shelters and cooked them to get the protomolecule good and happy, then *they* infected the casino level."

So where would you put a drug kitchen that was close to the rad shelters? Muss asked.

The roiling silver stream overhead veered left and then right, pouring through the air. Tiny curls of metal began to rain down, drawing thin trails of smoke behind them as they did.

"If I had the access? The backup environment controls. It's an emergency facility. No foot traffic unless someone's running inventory. It's got all the equipment for isolation built in already. Wouldn't be hard."

And since Protogen ran Eros security even before they put the disposable thugs in place, they'd be able to arrange it, Muss said, and she smiled joylessly. *See? I knew you could think that through.*

For less than a second, Muss was gone and Julie Mao—his Julie—was in her place. She was smiling and beautiful. Radiant. Her hair floated around her as if she were swimming in zero g. And then she was gone. His suit alarm warned him about an increasingly corrosive environment.

"Hang tight," he said to the burning air. "I'll be right there."

It was just less than thirty-three hours from the moment he'd realized that Juliette Andromeda Mao wasn't dead to the one when he cycled down the emergency seals and pulled his cart into Eros' backup environmental control facility. The clean, simple lines and error-reducing design of the place still showed under the outgrowth of the protomolecule. Barely. Knots of dark filament and nautilus spirals softened the corners of wall and floor and ceiling. Loops hung from the ceiling like Spanish moss. The familiar LED lights still shone under

the soft growth, but more illumination came from the swarm of faint blue dots glowing in the air. His first step onto the floor sank him into a thick carpet up the ankle; the bomb cart would have to stay outside. His suit reported a wild mix of exotic gases and aromatic molecules, but all he smelled was himself.

All the interior rooms had been remade. Transformed. He walked through the wastewater treatment control areas like a scuba diver in a grotto. The blue lights swirled around him as he passed, a few dozen adhering to his suit and glittering there. He almost didn't brush them off the helmet's faceplate, thinking they would smear like dead fireflies, but they only swirled back up into the air. The air recycling monitors still danced and glowed, the thousand alarms and incident reports silhouetting the latticework of protomolecule that covered the screens. Water was flowing somewhere close by.

She was in a hazmat analysis node, lying on a bed of the dark thread that spilled out from her spine until it was indistinguishable from a massive fairy-tale cushion of her own flowing hair. Tiny points of blue light glittered on her face, her arms, her breasts. The bone spurs that had been pressing out of her skin had grown into sweeping, almost architectural connections with the lushness around her. Her legs were gone, lost in the tangle of dark alien webs; she reminded Miller of a mermaid who had traded her fins for a space station. Her eyes were closed, but he could see them shifting and dancing under the lids. And she was breathing.

Miller stood beside her. She didn't have quite the same face as his imagined Julie. The real woman was wider through the jaw, and her nose wasn't as straight as he remembered it. He didn't notice that he was weeping until he tried to wipe the tears away, batting his helmet with a gloved hand. He had to make do with blinking hard until his sight cleared.

All this time. All this way. And here was what he'd come for.

"Julie," he said, putting his free hand on her shoulder. "Hey. Julie. Wake up. I need you to wake up now."

He had his suit's medical supplies. If he needed to, he could dose her with adrenaline or amphetamines. Instead, he rocked her gently, like he had Candace on a sleepy Sunday morning, back when she'd still been his wife, back in some distant, near-forgotten lifetime. Julie frowned, opened her mouth, closed it.

"Julie. You need to wake up now."

She moaned and lifted an ineffectual arm to push him away.

"Come back to me," he said. "You need to come back now."

Her eyes opened. They weren't human anymore—the sclera etched with swirls of red and black, the iris the same luminous blue as the fireflies. Not human, but still Julie. Her lips moved soundlessly. And

then:

"Where am I?"

"Eros Station," Miller said. "The place isn't what it used to be. Not even *where* it used to be, but… "

He pressed the bed of filament with his hand, judging it, and then rested his hip at her side like he was sitting on her bed. His body felt achingly tired and also lighter than it should. Not like low gravity. The unreal buoyancy had nothing to do with the weary flesh.

Julie tried to talk again, struggled, stopped, tried again.

"Who are you?"

"Yeah, we haven't officially met, have we? My name's Miller. I used to be a detective for Star Helix Security back on Ceres. Your parents contracted with us, only it was really more a friends-in-high-places thing. I was supposed to track you down, grab you, ship you back down the well."

"Kidnap job?" she said. Her voice was stronger. Her gaze seemed more focused.

"Pretty standard," Miller said, then sighed. "I kind of cocked it up, though."

Her eyes fluttered closed, but she kept talking.

"Something happened to me."

"Yeah. It did."

"I'm scared."

"No, no, no. Don't be scared. It's all right. In an ass-backward kind of way, but it's all right. Look, right now the whole station is heading back for Earth. Really fast."

"I dreamed I was racing. I was going home."

"Yeah, we need to stop that."

Her eyes opened again. She looked lost, anguished, alone. A tear streaked down from the corner of her eye, glowing blue.

"Give me your hand," Miller said. "No, really, I need you to hold something for me."

She lifted her hand slowly, seaweed in a soft current. He took his hand terminal, settled it in her palm, pressed her thumb to the dead man's switch.

"Just hold that there. Don't let it up."

"What is it?" she asked.

"Long story, just don't let up."

His suit alarms shrieked at him when he undid his helmet seals. He turned them off. The air was strange: acetate and cumin and a deep, powerful musk that made him think of hibernating animals. Julie watched him as he stripped off his gloves. Right then, the protomolecule was latching on to him, burrowing into his skin and eyes, getting ready to do to him what it had done to everyone on Eros.

He didn't care. He took the hand terminal back and then laced his fingers through hers.

"You're driving this bus, Julie," he said. "Do you know that? I mean, can you tell?"

Her fingers were cool in his, but not cold.

"I can feel… something," she said. "I'm hungry? Not hungry, but… I want something. I want to go back to Earth."

"We can't do that. I need you to change course," Miller replied. What had Holden said? *Give her Venus.* "Head for Venus instead."

"That's not what it wants," she said.

"It's what we've got on offer," Miller said. Then, a moment later: "We can't go home. We need to go to Venus."

She was quiet for a long moment.

"You're a fighter, Julie. You've never let anyone call your shots for you. Don't start now. If we go to Earth—"

"It'll eat them too. The same way it ate me."

"Yeah."

She looked up at him.

"Yeah," he said again. "Like that."

"What happens on Venus?"

"We die maybe. I don't know. But we don't take a lot of people with us, and we make sure no one gets a hold of this crap," he said, gesturing at the grotto around them. "And if we don't die, then… well, that'll be interesting."

"I don't think I can."

"You can. The thing that's doing all this? You're smarter than it is. You're in control. Take us to Venus."

The fireflies swirled around them, the blue light pulsing slightly: bright and dim, bright and dim. Miller saw it in her face when she made the decision. All around them, the lights went bright, the grotto flooding in soft blue, and then dimmed back to where they had been before. Miller felt something catch at the back of his neck like the first warning of a sore throat. He wondered if he'd have time to deactivate the bomb. And then he looked at Julie. Juliette Andromeda Mao. OPA pilot. Heir to the Mao-Kwikowski corporate throne. The seed crystal of a future beyond anything he'd ever dreamed. He'd have plenty of time.

"I'm afraid," she said.

"Don't be," he said.

"I don't know what's going to happen," she said.

"No one ever does. And, look, you don't have to do this alone," he said.

"I can feel something in the back of my mind. It wants something I don't understand. It's so *big.*"

Reflexively, he kissed the back of her hand. There was an ache starting deep in his belly. A sense of illness. A moment's nausea. The first pangs of his transformation into Eros.

"Don't worry," he said. "We're gonna be fine."

Chapter Fifty-Five: Holden

Holden dreamed.

He'd been a lucid dreamer most of his life, so when he found himself sitting in his parents' kitchen in the old house in Montana, talking to Naomi, he knew. He couldn't quite understand what she was saying, but she kept pushing her hair out of her eyes as she munched cookies and drank tea. And while he found that he wasn't ever able to pick a cookie up and take a bite out of it, he could smell them, and the memory of Mother Elise's chocolate chip oatmeal cookies was a very good one.

It was a good dream.

The kitchen strobed red once, and something changed. Holden felt the wrongness of it, felt the dream slipping from warm memory into nightmare. He tried to say something to Naomi but couldn't form the words. The room strobed red again, but she didn't seem to notice. He got up and went to the kitchen window and looked out. When the room strobed a third time, he saw what was causing it. Meteors were falling out of the sky, leaving behind them fiery trails the color of blood. He somehow knew they were chunks of Eros as it crashed through the atmosphere. Miller had failed. The nuclear attack had failed.

Julie had come home.

He turned around to tell Naomi to run, but black tendrils had burst through the floor and wrapped her up, pierced her body in multiple places. They poured from her mouth and eyes.

Holden tried to run to her, to help her, but he couldn't move, and when he looked down, he saw that the tendrils had come up and grabbed him too. One wrapped around his waist and held him. Another pressed into his mouth.

He woke with a yell in a dark room that was strobing with red light. Something was holding him around the waist. In a panic he began clawing at it, threatening to tear a fingernail loose on his left hand, before his rational mind reminded him where he was. On the ops deck, in his chair, belted down in zero g.

He popped his finger into his mouth, trying to soothe the abused fingertip he'd damaged on one of the chair buckles, and took a few deep breaths through his nose. The deck was empty. Naomi was asleep down in her cabin. Alex and Amos were off duty and presumably sleeping too. They'd spent almost two days without rest during the high-g chase of Eros. Holden had ordered everyone to get some shut-eye and had volunteered to take first watch.

And then had promptly fallen asleep. Not good.

The room flashed red again. Holden shook his head to clear the last of the sleep away, and refocused his attention on his console. A red warning light pulsed, and he tapped the screen to open up the menu. It was his threat panel. Someone was hitting them with a targeting laser.

He opened up the threat display and turned on the active sensors. The only ship within millions of kilometers was the *Ravi,* and it was the ship that was targeting them. According to the automatic logs, it had just started a few seconds earlier.

He reached out to activate the comm and call the *Ravi* as his incoming-message light flickered on. He opened the connection, and a second later, McBride's voice said, "*Rocinante,* cease maneuvering, open your outer airlock door, and prepare to be boarded."

Holden frowned at his console. Was that a weird joke?

"McBride, this is Holden. Uh, what?"

Her reply was in a clipped tone that was not encouraging.

"Holden, open your outer airlock and prepare for boarding. If I see a single defensive system wake up, I will fire on your ship. Is that understood?"

"No," he said, not quite able to keep the annoyance out of his voice. "It's not understood. And I'm not going to let you board me. What the hell is going on?"

"I've been ordered by UNN Command to take control of your vessel. You're charged with interfering with UNN military operations, unlawfully commandeering UNN military assets, and a list of other crimes I'm not going to bother reading right now. If you do not surrender immediately, we will be forced to fire on you."

"Oh," said Holden. The UNN had discovered that their missiles were changing course, had attempted to reprogram them, and had discovered that the missiles weren't listening.

They were upset.

"McBride," Holden said after a moment. "Boarding us won't do any good. We can't give you those missiles back. And it's unnecessary, anyway. They're just taking a little detour."

McBride's laugh sounded more like the sharp bark of an angry dog just before it bit.

"Detour?" she said. "You handed three thousand five hundred and seventy-three high-yield thermonuclear interplanetary ballistic missiles over to a traitor and accused war criminal!"

It took Holden a minute.

"You mean *Fred*? I think traitor is a bit harsh—"

McBride cut in.

"Deactivate the false transponders leading our missiles away from

Eros, and reactivate the transponders on the surface, or we will fire on your ship. You have ten minutes to comply."

The connection dropped with a click. Holden looked at the console with something between disbelief and outrage, then shrugged and hit the battle stations alarm. Deck lights came on all over the ship in an angry red. The warning Klaxon sounded three times. In less than two minutes, Alex rushed up the ladder to the cockpit, and half a minute behind him, Naomi threw herself into her ops station.

Alex spoke first.

"The *Ravi* is four hundred kilometers away," he said. "Ladar says her tube is open, and she's got us locked."

Clearly enunciating his words, Holden said, "Do not—I repeat, do not—open our tubes or attempt to get a target lock on the *Ravi* at this time. Just keep a close eye on her, and prepare to go defensive if she looks like she's firing. Let's not do anything to provoke her."

"Shall I begin jamming?" Naomi said from behind him.

"No, that would look aggressive. But prep a countermeasures package and have your finger on the ready button," Holden said. "Amos, you in engineering?"

"Roger that, Cap. Ready to go down here."

"Bring the reactor up to one hundred percent and pull control of the point defense cannons to your console down there. If they shoot at us at this range, Alex won't have time to fly and shoot back. You see a red dot on the threat console, you open up with the PDCs immediately. Copy?"

"Roger that," Amos said.

Holden blew a long breath through his teeth, then opened the channel to the *Ravi* again.

"McBride, this is Holden. We are not surrendering, we are not going to let you board us, and we aren't going to comply with your demands. Where do we go from here?"

"Holden," McBride said. "Your reactor is coming up. Are you getting ready to fight with us?"

"No, just getting ready to try and survive. Why, are we fighting?"

Another short harsh laugh.

"Holden," McBride said. "Why do I get the feeling you aren't taking this seriously?"

"Oh, I absolutely am," Holden replied. "I don't want you to kill me, and believe it or not, I have no desire to kill you. The nukes are on a little detour, but this isn't something we need to go down in flames over. I can't give you what you want, and I'm not interested in spending the next thirty years in a military prison. You gain nothing by shooting us, and I will fight back if it comes to that."

McBride cut the channel.

“Captain,” Alex said. “The *Ravi* is startin’ to maneuver. She’s spraying clutter. I think she’s gettin’ ready to make an attack run.”

Shit. Holden had been so sure he could talk her out of it.

“Okay, go defensive. Naomi, start your countermeasures. Amos? Got your finger on that button?”

“Ready,” Amos replied.

“Don’t hit it until you see a missile launch. Don’t want to force their hand.”

Sudden crushing g’s hit Holden, stuffing him into his chair. Alex had started maneuvering.

“At this distance, maybe I can out-turn her. Keep her from bein’ able to take a shot,” the pilot said.

“Do it, and open the tubes.”

“Roger,” Alex said, his professional pilot’s calm not quite able to keep the excitement about a possible battle out of his voice.

“I’ve broken the targeting lock,” Naomi said. “Their laser array is not nearly as good as the *Roci*’s. I’m just drowning it in clutter.”

“Hooray for bloated Martian defense budgets,” Holden replied.

The ship jerked suddenly through a series of wild maneuvers.

“Damn,” Alex said, his voice strained by the g-force of the sharp turns. “The *Ravi* just opened up on us with her PDCs.”

Holden checked his threat display and saw the long glowing pearl strands of incoming rounds displayed there. The shots were falling well behind them. The *Roci* reported the distance between the ships as 370 kilometers—pretty long range for computer targeting systems to hit a wildly maneuvering ship with a ballistic shot from another wildly maneuvering ship.

“Return fire?” Amos yelled into the comm.

“No!” Holden yelled back. “If she wanted us dead, she’d be throwing torpedoes. Don’t give her a reason to want us dead.”

“Cap, we’re out-turnin’ her,” Alex said. “The *Roci*’s just too fast. We’ll have a firing solution in less than a minute.”

“Roger,” Holden said.

“Do I take the shot?” Alex asked, his silly Martian cowboy accent fading as his tension rose.

“No.”

“Their targeting laser just shut off,” Naomi said.

“Which means they’ve given up trying to cut our jamming,” Holden replied, “and have just switched their missiles over to radar tracking.”

“Not as accurate,” Naomi said hopefully.

“A corvette like that carries at least a dozen fish. They only need to hit us with one to make us dead. And at this range… ”

A gentle sound came from his threat console, letting him know that the *Roci* had calculated a firing solution to the *Ravi.*

"I've got tone!" Alex yelled. "Fire?"

"No!" Holden said. He knew that inside the *Ravi,* they were getting the loud warning buzz of an enemy lock. *Stop,* Holden willed them. *Please don't make me kill you.*

"Uh," Alex said in a low voice. "Huh."

Behind Holden, at almost the same moment, Naomi said, "Jim?"

Before he could ask, Alex came back on the general comm.

"Hey, Captain, Eros just came back."

"What?" Holden said, a brief image of the asteroid sneaking up like a cartoon villain on the two circling warships popping into his head.

"Yeah," Alex said. "Eros. It just popped back up on radar. Whatever it was doing to block our sensors, it just stopped doing it."

"What's it doing?" Holden said. "Get me a course."

Naomi pulled the tracking information to her console and began working on it, but Alex was done a few seconds sooner.

"Yeah," he said. "Good guess. It's changing course. Still heading sunward, but deflecting away from the Earth vector it was on."

"If it keeps this course and speed," Naomi chimed in, "I'd say it was heading toward Venus."

"Wow," said Holden. "That was a joke."

"Good joke," Naomi said.

"Well, someone tell McBride she doesn't need to shoot us now."

"Hey," Alex said, his voice thoughtful. "If we made those nukes stop listening, that means we can't shut 'em down, right? Wonder where Fred's going to drop those."

"Hell if I know," Amos said. "Just disarmed Earth, though. That's gotta be fucking embarrassing."

"Unintended consequences," Naomi sighed. "Always with the unintended consequences."

Eros crashing into Venus was the most widely broadcast and recorded event in history. By the time the asteroid reached the sun's second planet, several hundred ships had taken up orbits there. Military vessels tried to keep the civilian ships away, but it was no use. They were just outnumbered. The video of Eros' descent was captured by military gun cameras, civilian ship telescopes, and the observatories on two planets and five moons.

Holden wished he could have been there to see it up close, but Eros had picked up speed after it had turned, almost as though the asteroid

were impatient for the journey to end now that the destination was in sight. He and the crew sat in the galley of the *Rocinante* and watched it on the broadcast newsfeeds. Amos had dug up yet another bottle of faux tequila from somewhere and was liberally splashing it into coffee cups. Alex had them flying toward Tycho at a gentle one-third g. No need to hurry now.

It was all over but the fireworks.

Holden reached out, took Naomi's hand, and held it tightly as the asteroid entered Venus orbit and then seemed to stop. He felt like he could feel the entire human race holding their breath. No one knew what Eros—no, what *Julie*—would do now. No one had spoken to Miller after the last time Holden had, and he wasn't answering his hand terminal. No one knew for sure what had happened on the asteroid.

When the end came, it was beautiful.

In orbit around Venus, Eros came apart like a puzzle box. The giant asteroid split into a dozen chunks, stringing out around the equator of the planet in a long necklace. Then those dozen pieces split into a dozen more, and then a dozen after that, a glittering fractal seed cloud spreading out across the entire surface of the planet, disappearing into the thick cloud layer that usually hid Venus from view.

"Wow," Amos said, his voice almost reverent.

"That was gorgeous," Naomi said. "Vaguely unsettling, but gorgeous."

"They won't stay there forever," Holden said.

Alex tossed off the last of the tequila in his glass, then refilled it from the bottle.

"What d'ya mean, Cap?" he asked.

"Well, I'm just guessing. But I doubt the things that built the protomolecule just wanted to store it here. This was part of a bigger plan. We saved the Earth, Mars, the Belt. Question is, what happens now?"

Naomi and Alex exchanged glances. Amos pursed his lips. On-screen, Venus glittered as arcs of lightning danced all across the planet.

"Cap," Amos said. "You are seriously harshing my buzz."

Epilogue: Fred

Frederick Lucius Johnson. Former colonel in Earth's armed forces, Butcher of Anderson Station. Thoth Station now too. Unelected prime minister of the OPA. He had faced his own mortality a dozen times, lost friends to violence and politics and betrayal. He'd lived through four assassination attempts, only two of which were on any record. He'd killed a pistol-wielding attacker using only a table knife. He'd given the orders that had ended hundreds of lives, and stood by his decisions.

And yet public speaking still made him nervous as hell. It didn't make sense, but there it was.

Ladies and gentlemen, we stand at a crossroads—

"General Sebastian will be at the reception," his personal secretary said. "Remember not to ask after her husband."

"Why? I didn't kill him, did I?"

"No, sir. He's having a very public affair, and the general's a bit touchy about it."

"So she might *want* me to kill him."

"You can make the offer, sir."

The "greenroom" was actually done in red and ochre, with a black leather couch, a mirrored wall, and a table laid out with hydroponic strawberries and carefully mineralized drinking water. The head of Ceres security, a dour-faced woman named Shaddid, had escorted him from the dock to the conference facilities three hours earlier. Since then, he'd been pacing—three steps in one direction, turn, three steps back—like the captain of an ancient ship of the line on his quarterdeck.

Elsewhere in the station, the representatives of the formerly warring factions were in rooms of their own, with secretaries of their own. Most of them hated Fred, which wasn't particularly a problem. Most of them feared him too. Not because of his standing in the OPA, of course. Because of the protomolecule.

The political rift between Earth and Mars was probably irreparable; the Earth forces loyal to Protogen had engineered a betrayal too deep for apologies, and too many lives had been lost on both sides for the coming peace to look anything like it had been before. The naive among the OPA thought this was a good thing: an opportunity to play one planet against the other. Fred knew better. Unless all three forces —Earth, Mars, and the Belt—could reach a real peace, they would inevitably fall back into a real war.

Now if only Earth or Mars thought of the Belt as something more

than an annoyance to be squashed after their true enemy was humiliated… But in truth, anti-Mars sentiment on Earth was higher now than it had been during the shooting war, and Martian elections were only four months away. A significant shift in the Martian polity could ease the tensions or make things immeasurably worse. Both sides had to see the big picture.

Fred stopped before a mirror, adjusted his tunic for the hundredth time, and grimaced.

"When did I turn into a damned marriage counselor?" he said.

"We aren't still talking about General Sebastian, are we, sir?"

"No. Forget I said anything. What else do I need to know?"

"There's a possibility that Blue Mars will try to disrupt your presentation. Hecklers and signs, not guns. Captain Shaddid has several Blues in custody, but some may have slipped past her."

"All right."

"You have interviews scheduled with two political narrowcasts and a news source based on Europa. The Europa interviewer is likely to ask about Anderson Station."

"All right. Anything new from Venus?"

"Something's happening down there," his secretary said.

"It's not dead, then."

"Apparently not, sir."

"Great," he said bitterly.

Ladies and gentlemen, we stand at a crossroads. On one hand there is the very real threat of mutual annihilation, and on the other—

And on the other, there's the bogeyman of Venus, getting ready to crawl up out of its well and slaughter you all in your sleep. I have the live sample, which is your best, if not only, hope of divining what its intentions and capabilities are, and which I have hidden so that you can't just march over and take it from me. It's the only reason any of you are listening to me in the first place. So how about a little respect here?

His secretary's terminal chirped, and she consulted it briefly.

"It's Captain Holden, sir."

"Do I have to?"

"It would be best if he felt he was part of the effort, sir. He has a track record of amateur press releases."

"Fine. Bring him in."

The weeks that had passed since Eros Station had come apart in the thick skies of Venus had been good to Holden, but prolonged high-g dives like the one the *Rocinante* had sustained chasing Eros had long-lasting effects. The burst blood vessels in the man's sclera had healed; the pressure bruising was gone from around his eyes and the back of his neck. Only a little hesitation in the way he walked spoke of the deep joint pain, cartilage still on its way back to its natural form.

Acceleration swagger, they'd called it, back when Fred had been a different man.

"Hey," Holden said. "You're looking pretty. Did you see the latest feed from Venus? Two-kilometer-high crystal towers. What do you think that is?"

"Your fault?" Fred suggested, keeping the tone friendly. "You could have told Miller to drive it into the sun."

"Yes, because two-kilometer-high crystal towers coming out of the sun wouldn't be creepy at all," Holden said. "Are those strawberries?"

"Have some," Fred said. He hadn't been able to eat anything since that morning.

"So," Holden said around a mouthful of fruit, "are they really going to sue me over this?"

"Unilaterally giving away all mineral and development rights to an entire planet on an open radio channel?"

"Yeah," Holden said.

"I would guess the people who actually owned those rights are probably going to sue you," Fred said. "If they ever figure out who they are."

"Could you give me a hand with that?" Holden asked.

"I'll be a character witness," Fred said. "I don't actually make the law."

"Then what exactly *are* you all doing here? Couldn't there be some kind of amnesty? We retrieved the protomolecule, tracked down Julie Mao on Eros, broke Protogen, and saved Earth."

"*You* saved Earth?"

"We helped," Holden said, but his voice had a more somber tone. Miller's death still bothered the captain. Fred knew how that felt. "It was a joint effort."

Fred's personal secretary cleared her throat and glanced toward the door. They'd need to go soon.

"I'll do what I can," Fred said. "I've got a lot of other things on the plate, but I'll do what I can."

"And Mars can't have the *Roci* back," Holden said. "Right of salvage says that's my ship now."

"They aren't going to see it that way, but I will do what I can."

"You keep saying that."

"It keeps being all I can do."

"And you'll tell them about him, right?" Holden said. "Miller. He deserves the credit."

"The Belter who went back into Eros of his own free will in order to save Earth? You're damn right I'm going to tell them about him."

"Not 'the Belter.' Him. Josephus Aloisus Miller."

Holden had stopped eating the free strawberries. Fred crossed his

arms.

"You've been reading up," Fred said.

"Yeah. Well. I didn't know him all that well."

"Neither did anybody else," Fred said, and then softened a little. "I know it's hard, but we don't need a real man with a complex life. We need a symbol of the Belt. An icon."

"Sir," the secretary said. "We really do need to go now."

"That's what got us here," Holden said. "Icons. Symbols. People without names. All of those Protogen scientists were thinking about biomass and populations. Not Mary who worked in supply and raised flowers in her spare time. None of them killed *her*."

"You think they wouldn't have?"

"I think if they were going to, they owed it to her to know her name. All their names. And you owe it to Miller not to make him into something he wasn't."

Fred laughed. He couldn't help it.

"Captain," he said, "if you're saying that I should amend my address to the peace conference so that it wasn't a noble Belter sacrificing himself to save the Earth—if you're suggesting that I say something like 'We happened to have a suicidal ex-cop on-site' instead—you understand this process less than I thought you did. Miller's sacrifice is a tool, and I'm going to use it."

"Even if it makes him faceless," Holden said. "Even if it makes him something he never was?"

"Especially if it makes him something he never was," Fred said. "Do you remember what he was like?"

Holden frowned and then something flickered in his eyes. Amusement. Memory.

"He was kind of a pain in the ass, wasn't he?" Holden said.

"That man could take a visitation from God with thirty underdressed angels announcing that sex was okay after all and make it seem vaguely depressing."

"He was a good man," Holden said.

"He wasn't," Fred said. "But he did his job. And now I've got to go do mine."

"Give 'em hell," Holden said. "And amnesty. Keep talking up the amnesty."

Fred walked down the curving hallway, his secretary close behind him. The conference halls had been designed for smaller things. Petty ones. Hydroponics scientists getting away from their husbands and wives and children to get drunk and talk about raising bean sprouts. Miners coming together to lecture each other about waste minimization and tailings disposal. High school band competitions. And instead, these work carpets and brushed-stone walls were going

to have to bear the fulcrum of history. It was Holden's fault that the shabby, small surroundings reminded him of the dead detective. They hadn't before.

The delegations were seated across the aisle from each other. The generals and political appointees and general secretaries of Earth and Mars, the two great powers together at his invitation to Ceres, to the Belt. Territory made neutral because neither side took it seriously enough to be concerned about their demands.

All of history had brought them here, to this moment, and now, in the next few minutes, Fred's job was to change that trajectory. The fear was gone. Smiling, he stepped up to the speaker's dais, the podium.

The pulpit.

There was a scattering of polite applause. A few smiles, and a few frowns. Fred grinned. He wasn't a man anymore. He was a symbol, an icon. A narrative about himself and about the forces at play in the solar system.

And for a moment, he was tempted. In that hesitation between drawing breath and speaking, part of him wondered what would happen if he shed the patterns of history and spoke about himself as a man, about the Joe Miller who he'd known briefly, about the responsibility they all shared to tear down the images they held of one another and find the genuine, flawed, conflicted people they actually were.

It would have been a noble way to fail.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said. "We stand at a crossroads. On one hand, there is the very real threat of mutual annihilation. On the other… "

He paused for effect.

"On the other, the stars."

Acknowledgments

Like most children, this book took a village. I would like to express my deep gratitude to my agents, Shawna and Danny, and to my editors DongWon and Darren. Also instrumental in the early formation of the book were Melinda, Emily, Terry, Ian, George, Steve, Walter, and Victor, of the New Mexico Critical Mass writers group, and also Carrie, who read an early draft. An additional thanks goes to Ian, who helped with some of the math, and who is responsible for none of the mistakes I made understanding it. I also owe an enormous debt to Tom, Sake Mike, Non-Sake Mike, Porter, Scott, Raja, Jeff, Mark, Dan, and Joe. Thanks, guys, for doing the beta testing. And finally, a special thanks to the *Futurama* writers and Bender Bending Rodriguez for babysitting the kid while I wrote.

extras

meet the author

JAMES S. A. COREY is the pen name of fantasy author Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck, George R. R. Martin's assistant. They both live in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Find out more about this series at www.the-expanse.com.

interview

Leviathan Wakes ***is the first book in a series called The Expanse. What kind of story are you telling in this series?***

There's a lot of science fiction that talks about the near future. There's a lot about great galaxy-spanning empires of the distant future. But there's not much that talks about the part in between. The Expanse is playing on that bridge. Whatever drives us off Earth to the rest of the solar system or from there to the stars, the problems we have are the ones we bring with us. What I want to do is write good old-fashioned space opera centered around human stories, but with an increasingly large backdrop.

It seems like **Leviathan Wakes** ***is a science fiction book, but it borrows from a lot of other genres as well, including horror and noir. Did you intend to blend those genres? What kind of book do you feel this is?***

It's definitely science fiction of the old-school space opera variety. That's the story I wanted to tell. But half of the story was a detective story, and as soon as Detective Miller hit the page, he told me in a loud voice that he was a classic noir character. It was in his voice and the way he talked about things, you know? As for the horror feel, that's just the way I roll. I've never written anything in my life that didn't at least blur the line into horror. If I wrote greeting cards, they'd probably have a squick factor.

Leviathan Wakes ***has two protagonists with very different worldviews, which are often in conflict. Can you describe those views and why you chose that particular conflict?***

You know how they say science fiction is about the future you're writing about, but it's also about the time you're writing in? Holden and Miller have got two different views on the ethical use of information. That's very much a current argument. Holden's my holy fool. He's an idealist, a man who faces things with this very optimistic view of humanity. He believes that if you give people all of the information, they'll do the right thing with it, because people are naturally good. Miller is a cynic and a nihilist. He looks at the dissemination of information as a game you play. He doesn't have faith in anyone else's moral judgment. Control of

information is how you get people to do what you want, and he doesn't trust anyone else to make that call. I picked those two characters because they're both right, and they're both wrong. By having them in the same story, I can have them talk to each other. And that central disagreement is sort of underneath everything else that happens.

Leviathan Wakes ***has a gritty and realistic feel. How much research did you do on the technology side of things, and how important was it to you that they be realistic and accurate?***

Okay, so what you're really asking me there is if this is hard science fiction. The answer is an emphatic no. I have nothing but respect for well-written hard science fiction, and I wanted everything in the book to be plausible enough that it doesn't get in the way. But the rigorous how-to with the math shown? It's not that story. This is working man's science fiction. It's like in *Alien,* we meet the crew of the *Nostromo* doing their jobs in this very blue-collar environment. They're truckers, right? Why is there a room in the *Nostromo* where water leaks down off of chains suspended from the ceiling? Because it looks cool and makes the world feel a little messy. It gives you the feel of the world. Ridley Scott doesn't explain why that room exists, and when most people watch the film, it never even occurs to them to ask. What kind of drive does the *Nostromo* use? I bet no one walked out of the film asking that question. I wanted to tell a story about humans living and working in a well-populated solar system. I wanted to convey a feeling of what that would be like, and then tell a story about the people who live there.

So how does the Epstein drive work?

Very well. Efficiently.

In your acknowledgments you thank the New Mexico Critical Mass writers group. What effect did having that workshop environment have on your work?

Well, Critical Mass is a lot more than a workshop or critical group. It's more like a writer's mafia. Just about anything you might need, someone in the group can get it for you. Walter Jon Williams, who wrote the brilliant Dread Empire's Fall space opera series, was there to give important tips about writing in that genre. S. M. Stirling and Victor Milan write some of best action in the business, and there was a lot of action for them to critique.

Ian Tregillis is an actual astrophysicist and made himself available for technical questions. Melinda Snodgrass is pretty much the Yoda of letting you know when you've wandered too far away from your plot. And the entire group, including Emily Mah, Terry England, and George R. R. Martin, was there to read and critique the early drafts of the book, and a lot of changes were made based on their advice.

You've worked with George R. R. Martin a lot in the past. What kind of advice did he have for this project?

Yes, I've done a number of projects with him in one incarnation or another. In this case, he was mostly just encouraging. He likes old-fashioned space opera, and he followed my progress on the book with great interest. He was also the first to read the final version. He was very complimentary. He said at one point that it was the best book about vomit zombies he'd ever read. That was nice.

Where do you see the Expanse series going from here?

Well, I'm contracted with Orbit for at least two more books. They are titled *Caliban's War* and *Dandelion Sky*. I hope to keep exploring the idea of human expansion into the solar system and beyond, and balancing the very real threats that the galaxy poses for the fledgling human diaspora against the threats that those same humans will bring with them. For up-to-date information on what I'm up to and where the project is headed, people can visit www.the-expanse.com and get the latest.

introducing

If you enjoyed LEVIATHAN WAKES,

look out for

CALIBAN'S WAR

Book Two of The Expanse

by James S. A. Corey

"Snoopy's out again," Private Hillman said. "I think his CO must be pissed at him."

Gunnery Sergeant Roberta Draper of the Martian Marine Corps upped the magnification on her armor's heads-up display and looked in the direction Hillman was pointing. Twenty-five hundred meters away, a squad of four United Nations marines were tromping around their outpost, backlit by the giant greenhouse dome they were guarding. A greenhouse dome identical in nearly all respects to the dome that was behind her.

One of the four UN marines had black smudges on the sides of his helmet that looked like beagle ears.

"Yep, that's Snoopy," Bobbie said. "Been on every patrol detail so far today. Wonder what he did."

Guard duty around the greenhouses on Ganymede meant doing what you could to keep your mind occupied. Including speculating on the lives of the marines on the other side.

The other side. Eighteen months before, there hadn't been sides. The inner planets had all been one big, happy, slightly dysfunctional family. Then the Eros incident, and now the two superpowers were dividing up the solar system between them, and the one moon neither side was willing to give up was Ganymede, breadbasket of the Jovian system.

As the only moon with any magnetosphere, it was the only place where dome-grown crops stood a chance in Jupiter's harsh radiation belt, and even there, the domes and habitats had to be shielded to protect civilians from the eight rems a day burning off Jupiter and

onto the moon's surface.

Bobbie's armor had been designed to let a soldier walk through a nuclear bomb crater an hour after the blast. It also worked well at keeping Jupiter from frying Martian marines.

Behind the Earth soldiers on patrol, their dome glowed in a shaft of weak sunlight captured by enormous orbital mirrors. Even with the mirrors, most terrestrial plants would have died, starved of sunlight. Only the heavily modified versions the Ganymede scientists cranked out could hope to survive in the trickle of light the mirrors fed them.

"Be sunset soon," Bobbie said, still watching the Earth marines outside their little guard hut, knowing they were watching her too. In addition to Snoopy, she spotted the one they called Stumpy because he or she couldn't be much more than a meter and a half tall. She wondered what their nickname for her was. Maybe Big Red. Her armor still had the Martian surface camouflage on it. She hadn't been on Ganymede long enough to get it resurfaced with mottled gray and white.

One by one, over the course of five minutes, the orbital mirrors winked out as Ganymede passed behind Jupiter for a few hours. The glow from the greenhouse behind her changed to actinic blue as the artificial lights came on. While the overall light level didn't go down much, the shadows shifted in strange and subtle ways. Above, the sun —not even a disk from here as much as the brightest star—flashed as it passed behind Jupiter's limb, and for a moment the planet's faint ring system was visible.

"They're going back in," Corporal Travis said. "Snoop's bringing up the rear. Poor guy. Can we bail too?"

Bobbie looked around at the featureless dirty ice of Ganymede. Even in her high-tech armor she could feel the moon's chill.

"Nope."

Her squad grumbled but fell in line as she led them on a slow low-gravity shuffle around the dome. In addition to Hillman and Travis, she had a green private named Gourab on this patrol. And even though he'd been in the marines all of about a minute and a half, he grumbled just as loud as the other two in his Mariner Valley drawl.

She couldn't blame them. It was make-work. Something for the Martian soldiers on Ganymede to do to keep them busy. If Earth decided it needed Ganymede all to itself, four grunts walking around the greenhouse dome wouldn't stop them. With dozens of Earth and Mars warships in a tense standoff in orbit, if hostilities broke out, the ground pounders would probably find out only when the surface bombardment began.

To her left, the dome rose to almost half a kilometer: triangular glass panels separated by gleaming copper-colored struts that turned

the entire structure into a massive Faraday cage. Bobbie had never been inside one of the greenhouse domes. She'd been sent out from Mars as part of a huge surge in troops to the outer planets and had been walking patrols on the surface almost since day one. Ganymede to her was a spaceport, a small marine base, and the even smaller guard outpost she currently called home.

As they shuffled around the dome, Bobbie watched the unremarkable landscape. Ganymede didn't change much without a catastrophic event. The surface was mostly silicate rock and water ice a few degrees warmer than space. The atmosphere was oxygen so thin it could pass as an industrial vacuum. Ganymede didn't weather. It changed when rocks fell on it from space, or when warm water from the liquid core forced itself onto the surface and created short-lived lakes. Neither thing happened all that often. At home on Mars, wind and dust changed the landscape hourly. Here, she was walking through the footsteps of the day before and the day before and the day before. And if she never came back, those footprints would outlive her. Privately, she thought it was sort of creepy.

A rhythmic squeaking started to cut through the normally smooth hiss and thump sounds her powered armor made. She usually kept the suit's HUD minimized. It got so crowded with information that a marine knew everything except what was actually in front of her. Now she pulled it up, using blinks and eye movements to page over to the suit's diagnostic screen. A yellow telltale warned her that the suit's left knee actuator was low on hydraulic fluid. Must be a leak somewhere, but a slow one, because the suit couldn't find it.

"Hey, guys, hold up a minute," Bobbie said. "Hilly, you have any extra hydraulic fluid in your pack?"

"Yep," said Hillman, already pulling it out.

"Give my left knee a squirt, would you?"

While Hillman crouched in front of her, working on her suit, Gourab and Travis began an argument that seemed to be about sports. Bobbie tuned it out.

"This suit is ancient," Hillman said. "You really oughta upgrade. This sort of thing is just going to happen more and more often, you know."

"Yeah, I should," Bobbie said. But the truth was that was easier said than done. Bobbie was not the right shape to fit into one of the standard suits, and the marines made her jump through a series of flaming hoops every time she requisitioned a new custom one. At two meters tall, she was only a bit above average height for a Martian male, but thanks in part to her Polynesian ancestry, she weighed in at more than 140 kilos at one g. It wasn't fat, but her muscles seemed to get bigger every time she even walked through a weight room, and as

a marine, she trained all the time.

The suit she had now was the first one in twelve years of active duty that actually seemed to fit well. And even though it was beginning to show its age, it was just easier to try to keep it running than beg and plead for a new one.

Hillman was just starting to put his tools away when Bobbie's radio crackled to life.

"Outpost four to stickman. Come in, stickman."

"Roger four," Bobbie replied. "This is stickman one. Go ahead."

"Stickman one, where are you guys? You're half an hour late and some shit is going down over here."

"Sorry four, some equipment trouble here," Bobbie said, wondering what sort of shit might be going down, but not enough to ask about it over an open frequency.

"Return to the outpost immediately. We have shots fired at the UN outpost. We're going into lockdown."

It took Bobbie a moment to parse that. She could see her men staring at her, their faces a mix of puzzlement and fear.

"Uh, the Earth guys are shooting at you?" she finally asked.

"Not yet, but they're shooting. Get your asses back here."

Hillman jumped to his feet. Bobbie flexed her knee once and got greens on her diagnostic. She gave Hilly a nod of thanks, then said, "Double-time it back to the outpost. Go."

Bobbie and her squad were still half a kilometer from the outpost when the general alert went out. Her suit's HUD came up on its own, switching to combat mode. The sensor package went to work looking for hostiles and linked up to one of the satellites for a top-down view. She felt the click as the gun built into the suit's right arm switched to free-fire mode.

A thousand alarms would be sounding if an orbital bombardment had begun, but she couldn't help looking up at the sky anyway. No flashes or missile trails. Nothing but Jupiter's bulk.

Bobbie took off for the outpost at a dead run. Her squad followed without a word. A person trained in the use of a strength-augmenting suit running in low gravity could cover a lot of ground quickly. The outpost came into view around the curve of the dome in just a few seconds, and a few seconds after that, the cause of the alarm.

UN marines were charging at the Martian outpost. The yearlong

cold war was going hot. Somewhere deep behind the cool mental habits of training and discipline, she was surprised. She hadn't really thought this day would come.

The rest of her platoon were out of the outpost and arranged in a firing line facing the UN position. Someone had driven *Yojimbo* out onto the line, and the four-meter-tall combat mech towered over the other marines, looking like a headless giant in power armor, his massive cannon moving slowly as it tracked the incoming Earth troops. The UN soldiers were covering the 2,500 meters between the two outposts at full speed.

Why isn't anyone talking? she wondered. The silence coming from her platoon was eerie.

And then, just as her squad got to the firing line, her suit squealed a jamming warning at her. The top-down vanished as she lost contact with the satellite. Her team's life signs and equipment status reports went dead as her link to their suits was cut off. The faint static of the open comm channel disappeared, leaving an even more unsettling silence.

She used hand motions to place her team at the right flank, then moved up the line to find Lieutenant Givens, her CO. She spotted his suit right at the center of the line, almost directly under *Yojimbo*. She ran up and placed her helmet against his.

"What the fuck is going on, El Tee?" she shouted.

He gave her an irritated look and yelled, "Your guess is as good as mine. We can't tell them to back off because of the jamming, and visual warnings are being ignored. Before the radio cut out, I got authorization to fire if they come within half a klick of our position."

Bobbie had a couple hundred more questions, but the UN troops would cross the five-hundred-meter mark in just a few more seconds, so she ran back to anchor the right flank with her squad. Along the way, she had her suit count the incoming forces and mark them all as hostiles. The suit reported seven targets. Less than a third of the UN troops at their outpost.

This makes no sense.

She had her suit draw a line on the HUD at the five-hundred-meter mark. She didn't tell her boys that was the free-fire zone. She didn't need to. They'd open fire when she did without needing to know why.

The UN soldiers had crossed the one-kilometer mark, still without firing a shot. They were coming in a scattered formation, with six out front in a ragged line, and a seventh bringing up the rear about seventy meters behind. Her suit HUD selected the figure on the far left of the enemy line as her target, picking the one closest to her by default. Something itched at the back of her brain and she overrode the suit and selected the target at the rear and told it to magnify.

The small figure suddenly enlarged in her targeting reticule. She felt a chill move down her back and magnified again.

The figure chasing the six UN marines wasn't wearing a suit. Nor was it, properly speaking, human. Its skin was covered in chitinous plates, like large black scales. Its head was a massive horror, easily twice as large as it should be and covered in strange protruding growths.

But most disturbing of all were its hands. Far too large for its body, and too long for their width, they were a childhood-nightmare version of hands. The hands of the troll under the bed or the witch sneaking in through the window. They flexed and grasped at nothing with a constant manic energy.

The Earth forces weren't attacking. They were retreating.

"Shoot the thing chasing them," Bobbie yelled to no one.

Before the UN soldiers could cross the half kilometer that would cause the Martians to open fire, the thing caught them.

"Oh, holy shit," Bobbie whispered. "Holy *shit*."

It grabbed one UN marine in its huge hands and tore the man in half like paper. Titanium and ceramic armor tore as easily as the flesh inside, spilling broken bits of technology and wet human viscera indiscriminately onto the ice. The remaining five soldiers ran even harder, but the monster chasing them barely slowed as it killed.

"Shoot it shoot it shoot it," Bobbie screamed and opened fire. Bobbie's training and the technology of her combat suit combined to make her an extremely efficient killing machine. As soon as her finger pulled the trigger on her suit's gun, a stream of two-millimeter armor-piercing rounds streaked out at the creature at a thousand meters per second. In just under one second, she fired nearly fifty rounds at it. It was a relatively slow-moving human-sized target, running in a straight line. Her targeting computer could do ballistic corrections that would let her hit a softball-sized object moving at supersonic speeds. Every bullet she fired at the monster hit.

It didn't matter.

The rounds went through it, probably not slowing appreciably before they exited. Each exit wound sprouted a spray of black filaments that fell onto the snow instead of blood. It was like shooting water. The wounds closed almost faster than they were created; the only sign the thing had even been hit was the trail of black fibers in its wake.

And then it caught a second UN marine. Instead of tearing him to pieces like it had the last one, it spun and hurled the fully armored Earther—probably massing more than five hundred kilos total—toward Bobbie. Her HUD tracked the UN soldier on his upward arc and helpfully informed her that the monster had thrown him not

toward her, but *at* her. In a very flat trajectory. Which meant fast.

She dove to the side as quickly as her suit would let her. The hapless UN marine swiped Hillman, who'd been standing next to her, and then both of them were gone, bouncing down the ice at lethal speeds.

By the time she turned back to the monster, it had killed two more UN soldiers.

The entire Martian line opened fire on it, including *Yojimbo*'s big cannon. The two remaining Earth soldiers diverged and ran at angles away from the thing, trying to give their Martian counterparts an open firing lane. The creature was hit hundreds, thousands of times. It stitched itself back together while remaining at a full run, never more than slowing when one of *Yojimbo*'s cannon shots detonated nearby.

Bobbie, back on her feet, joined in the barrage but it didn't make any difference. The creature slammed into the Martian line, killing two marines faster than the eye could follow. *Yojimbo* slid to one side, far more nimble than a machine of its size should be. Bobbie though Sa'id must be driving it. He swore he could make the big mech dance the tango when he wanted to. It didn't matter. Even before Sa'id could bring the mech's cannon around for a point-blank shot, the creature ran right up its side, gripped the pilot hatch, and tore the door off its hinges. Sa'id was snatched from his cockpit harness and hurled sixty meters straight up.

The other marines had begun to fall back, firing as they went. Without radio, there was no way to coordinate the retreat. Bobbie found herself running toward the dome with the rest. The small and distant part of her mind that wasn't panicking knew that the dome's glass and metal would offer no protection against something that could tear an armored man in half and rip a nine-ton mech to pieces. That part of her mind recognized the futility in attempting to override her terror.

By the time she found the external door to the dome, there was only one other marine left with her. Gourab. Up close, she could see his face through the armored glass of his helmet. He was screaming something at her she couldn't hear. She started to lean forward to touch helmets with him when he shoved her backward onto the ice. He was hammering on the door controls with one metal fist, trying to smash his way in in his mindless panic, when the creature caught him and peeled the helmet off his suit. Gourab stood for one moment, face in vacuum, eyes blinking and mouth open in a soundless scream; then the creature tore off his head as easily as it had his helmet.

It turned and looked at Bobbie, still flat on her back.

Up close, she could see that it had bright blue eyes. A glowing, electric blue. They were beautiful. She raised her gun and held down

the trigger for half a second before she realized she'd run out of ammo long before. The creature looked at her gun with what she would have sworn was curiosity, then looked into her eyes and cocked its head to one side.

This is it, she thought. *This is how I go out, and I'm not going to know what did it, or why.* Dying she could handle. Dying without any answers seemed terribly cruel.

The creature took one step toward her, then stopped and shuddered. A new pair of limbs burst out of its midsection and writhed in the air like tentacles. Its head, already grotesque, seemed to swell up. The blue eyes flashed as bright as the lights in the domes.

And then it exploded in a ball of fire that hurled her away across the ice and slammed her into a low ridge hard enough for the impact-absorbing gel in her suit to go rigid, freezing her in place.

She lay on her back, fading toward unconsciousness. The night sky above her began to flash with light. The ships in orbit, shooting.

Cease fire, she thought, pressing the thought out into the blackness. *They were retreating. Cease fire.* Her radio was still out. She couldn't tell anyone that the UN marines hadn't been attacking.

Or that something else had.

BOOKS BY JAMES S. A. COREY

THE EXPANSE

Leviathan Wakes

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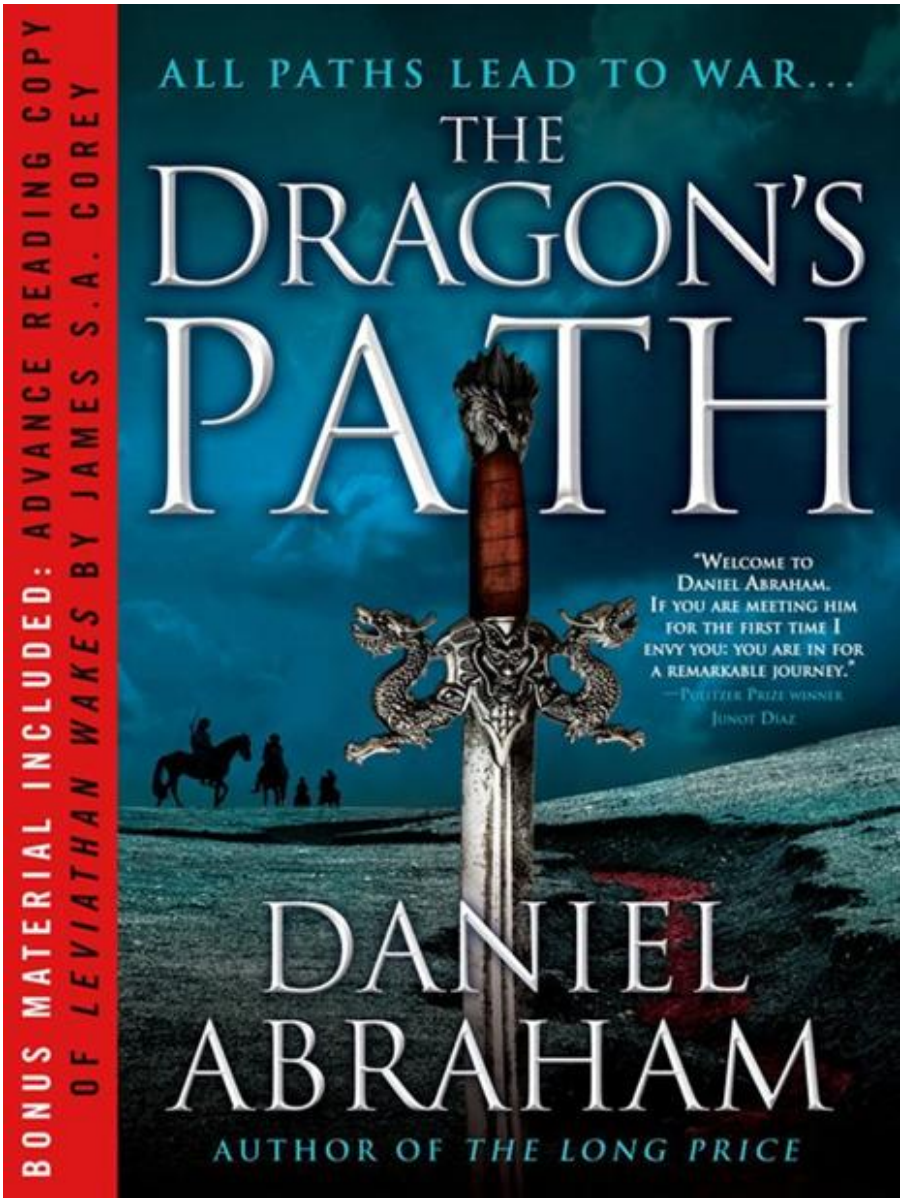
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ALL PATHS LEAD TO WAR...
THE DRAGON'S PATH
"WELCOME TO DANIEL ABRAHAM. IF YOU ARE MEETING HIM FOR THE FIRST TIME I ENVY YOU: YOU ARE IN FOR A REMARKABLE JOURNEY."
—PULITZER PRIZE WINNER JUNOT DIAZ
DANIEL ABRAHAM
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